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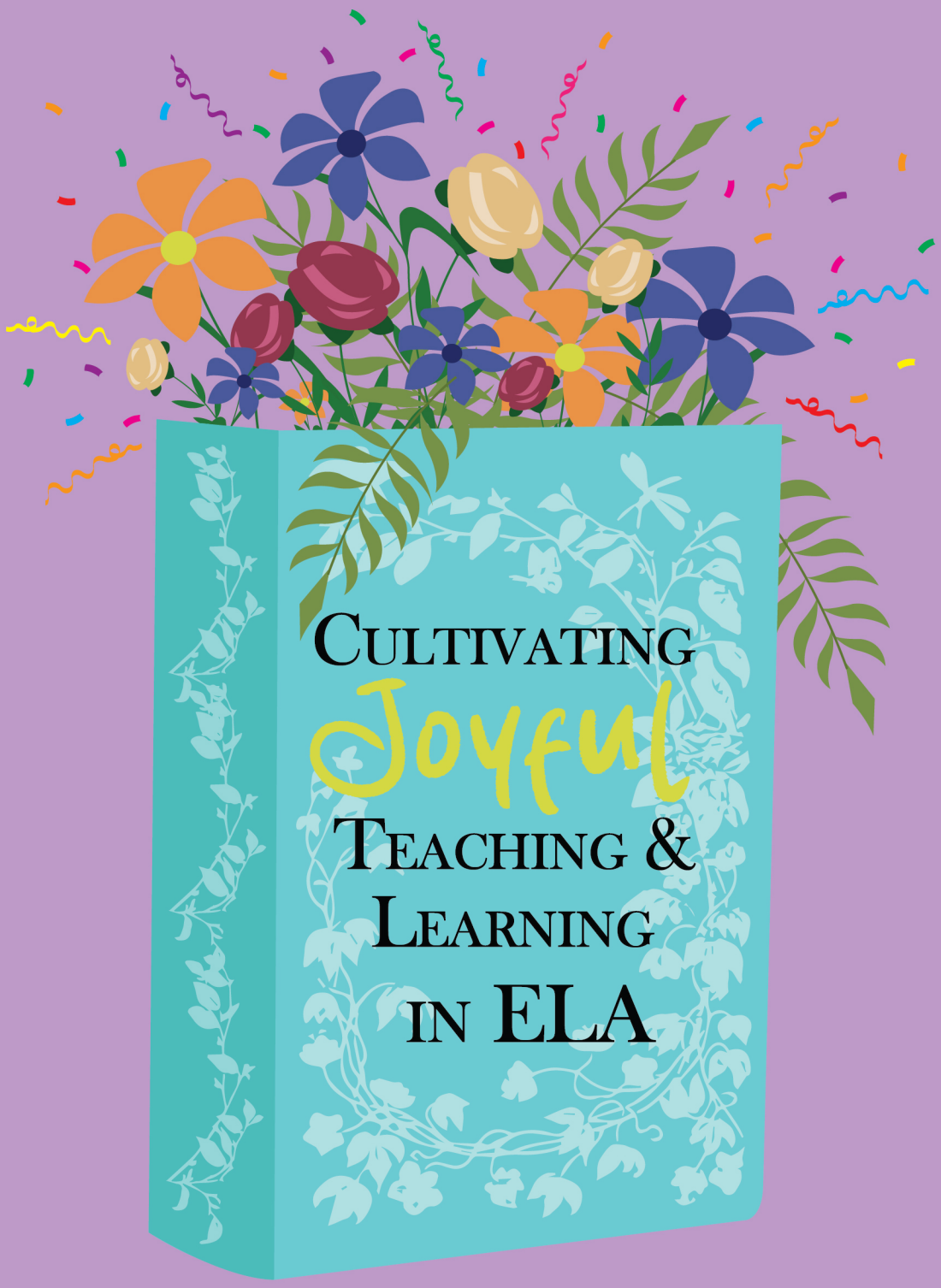

Editors' Note

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It is our pleasure to introduce you to the 2024 issue of *New Jersey English Journal* (*NJEJ*). This year's theme is "Cultivating Joyful Teaching and Learning in ELA." In our call for submissions, we asked authors to consider the following questions:

- How can we help our students find joy in learning language and literature? How can we cultivate (or reclaim) it for ourselves as teachers?
- What are the new or tried-and-true ways we can cultivate joyful teaching and learning in our classrooms? What makes teaching and learning ELA joyful in the 21st century?
- What are the unexpected moments or sources of joy in our ELA classrooms? How can we build on them for ourselves and our students?
- How can schools, school leaders, and educators collaborate to create joyful learning communities? How can we push back against practices or policies that disrupt joyful teaching and learning?

This issue features work in three genres: poetry, reflective pieces, and research articles. This issue shares an inspiring variety of ways that ELA teachers are cultivating joy in their classes, such as culturally responsive genre discovery, student-selected digital texts, and authenticity, purpose, and mindfulness. We are proud to share work from writers across the country.

Two secondary ELA teachers, Darlene Calderon and Kayla Sullivan, and ELA teacher educator Emily Smith share vignettes from their classrooms in which they illustrate ways they have nurtured moments of joy in their lessons by centering their students' vulnerability and their own.

In "Centering Joy in the Classroom: Authentic Pedagogy Through Purpose and Mindfulness," E. Mariah Spencer explores the need for authenticity as key to a joyful classroom and outlines the ways in which this authenticity can be achieved. Purpose and mindfulness are the linchpins to creating an authentic and joyful learning environment, she finds.

Annie Yon proposes station rotation activities as a method for restoring the joy and "exuberant discovery" that Alfie Kohn observed as lacking in many classrooms.

Carly Berwick explores how student-led culturally responsive genre discovery can connect to curricular mandates, affirm student knowledge, and spark sustained and engaged student work. She offers four principles for uncovering students' existing, out-of-school genre understandings.

Lauren Zucker, Kristen Hawley Turner, and Rachel Besharat Mann recommend that teachers incorporate student-selected digital texts for pleasure reading in secondary and higher education contexts.

Poetic contributions, such as those from Bill Meissner, Joseph Pizzo, and Oona Abrams, make powerful statements about the particular joys and challenges of teaching English language arts.

Since 2020, when we shifted *NJEJ* to a digital format and uploaded archival issues dating back to 2013, our journal has attracted a wide online readership. As of August 2024, prior to publishing the current issue, our 263 works have 31,400 unique downloads from 179 different countries representing 1,907 institutions. We thank Montclair State University for hosting our journal on their library's Digital Commons repository, which helps readers find our pieces through search engines, institutional databases, and keyword searches.

This year's cover was designed by rising sophomore Prisca Li of Northern Highlands Regional High School, who was nominated for the opportunity by her graphic design teacher, Doreen Albano. Prisca worked in consultation with our editors to execute the design, drawing inspiration from our past several covers designed by Noreen Hosny, winner of the 2020 cover design contest. We look forward to seeing future *NJEJ* cover designs from this talented young artist.

This issue would not be possible without the dedication and service of our reviewers. We also extend our thanks to the NJCTE Board for their recommendations, and to Valerie Mattessich, NJCTE President, for her steadfast leadership and support.

New Jersey English Journal
2024 Issue, Volume 13

New Jersey English Journal is a peer-reviewed publication of New Jersey Council of Teachers of English (NJCTE). This journal is intended to serve our members through the sharing and showcasing of research, best practices, and ideas related to K-12 and college English Language Arts education, and to encourage diverse discussions and inclusion.

NJCTE OPPORTUNITIES

NJEJ REVIEWERS

NJEJ seeks educators with experience in P-12 and/or postsecondary English Language Arts to serve as reviewers. Reviewers are typically asked to read and evaluate 1-2 submissions per year. Instructions to join our reviewer pool can be found on the journal's website: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/

WRITING CONTESTS

NJCTE offers several student writing contests. Please encourage your students to submit to them—and join us as a judge. For more information, see https://www.njcte.org/njcte-writing-contest.

Professional development workshops at the 2024 Spring Conference, "Beyond Boundaries: Exploring Interdisciplinary Literacies," including a session on incorporating visual texts (left) and a session co-run by students and educators (right)

AWARDS

NJCTE offers several awards for teachers and authors. More information about these awards and past award winners are listed on our website: https://www.njcte.org/awards-contests.

- The Muriel Becker Award is the highest honor bestowed on a writer by the New Jersey Council of Teachers of English. It has been given annually since the 1980s to a writer deemed by the Becker Award committee to be someone who reflects the best of positive ideals that inspire young readers to high achievement.

New Jersey writer Alicia Cook accepting the 2024 Muriel R. Becker Award from NJCTE President Valerie Mattessich at the NJCTE Spring Conference.

Keynote speaker Alicia Cook signing books for NJCTE Spring Conference attendees.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Follow us on Instagram at @thenjcte for news and updates about our organization and English Language Arts. Consider sharing your work—a project, an anecdote, some words of inspiration, a classroom story—with our members around the state as a featured guest author on our website, http://www.njcte.org/. We invite you to submit pieces over 500 words to our journal.

CONFERENCES & PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

NJCTE hosts its annual conference in the spring. We hope you will join us as an attendee or presenter! Learn more at https://www.njcte.org/.

Additionally, NJCTE offers professional learning opportunities throughout the year. We also held our Spring Conference on "Joyful Teaching: Reviving Engagement in ELA," tied to this year's journal theme. This year's conference will be held on March 20, 2025, and the theme will

be “Visual Literacy: Curricular Relevance for Modern Students.” We are accepting proposals for presentations through December 13, 2024. Visit the NJCTE website (https://www.njcte.org) for more information.

JOIN NJCTE!

Looking to connect with New Jersey ELA educators and access high-quality, local professional development opportunities? Join NJCTE. Read more about member benefits at https://www.njcte.org/member-benefits.

Subscribe to our mailing list at https://www.njcte.org for information about NJCTE membership and future events.

Current and former members of the NJCTE executive board at the 2024 Spring Conference held at Drew University in collaboration with the Drew Writing Project / Digital Literacies Collaborative.

Valerie Mattessich (right), President of New Jersey Council of Teachers of English, and Kristen Hawley Turner (left), Director of the Drew Writing Project and Director of Teacher Education at Drew University, welcome attendees to the 2024 Spring Conference.

CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS
2025 Issue of *New Jersey English Journal*

New Jersey English Journal, a peer-reviewed publication of New Jersey Council of Teachers of English, invites you to share submissions on the theme, **"Bridging Literacy and Learning."** We ask writers to consider ways to connect literacy with learning goals across disciplines. How can literacy serve as a bridge between students' experiences in the ELA classroom and their broader educational journeys? How can teachers help students apply literacy and language skills in meaningful, interdisciplinary ways? Ultimately, how can students use language and literacy to enhance their understanding in various subjects and in their personal lives, and how can teachers leverage these connections to foster deeper, more inclusive learning experiences?

We seek research and practitioner-oriented pieces (~1000–3000 words), personal essays (~1000+ words), and original poetry related to this issue's theme and geared towards an audience of P-12 and postsecondary English Language Arts educators. Please note that word limits are suggestions and not fixed requirements. We welcome single and co-authored submissions from both veteran and early-career teachers, and we especially invite new writers, pre-service teachers, and graduate students to develop submissions. Writers are encouraged to access past issues at <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/> to review successful submissions. We invite you to respond to the theme **"Bridging Literacy and Learning"** by considering such questions as:

- How can we help students see the connections between literacy and learning in other subjects? How can teachers promote these interdisciplinary links to deepen understanding across the curriculum and/or beyond the classroom?
- How can highlighting interdisciplinary connections enhance the relevance of English Language Arts for our students, particularly for those who may not see themselves reflected in the curriculum or whose future aspirations lie outside ELA?
- What do literacy and learning across the disciplines mean in light of the rapidly evolving context of AI tools for both teachers and students? What in-school and out-of-school literacies will students need in a future in which AI plays a growing part?
- How can schools, school leaders, and educators collaborate to highlight the importance of literacy across all subjects?

Submissions will be accepted until **Tuesday, February 11, 2025**, via <**https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/**>. All submissions will be reviewed through a double-blind process by multiple peer reviewers. Submissions should not have been previously published or be under review elsewhere. Manuscripts should follow current APA guidelines for citations. All writing should appear in Times New Roman 12 pt. font, and authors' names and identifying information must be removed from all submissions. Send any queries to <**njenglishjournal@gmail.com**>.

NJCTE Writing Contest 2024

Style Criteria **Poetry (50-line max.)**
Short Story (5-page max., double-spaced)
Personal essay (5-page max., double-spaced)
MUST RESPOND TO PROMPT

Writing from the heart, with hope to empower humanity

Essay Prompt

The NCTE theme of "Heart, Hope, Humanity" connects the lives of youth with leadership. A leader impacts hearts by providing hope, inspiring humanity, and galvanizing student thinking.

Consider how leadership —personal, private, or within society— affects you as a young person. How do leaders gain and maintain power? Do we necessarily relinquish power when we appoint leaders? Does leadership flourish more through shared wisdom and community? What do you think your generation might do better than those who came before it did? What and who do you think has helped form your beliefs about our society and your role in it?

Write a short story, poem or essay that emanates from your heart, evinces hope, and meditates on humanity as a high school student in 2024.

NJCTE is a professional organization committed to applying the power of language and literacy to pursue justice and equity for the students and teachers of New Jersey. NJCTE is the New Jersey affiliate organization of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

Why Join NJCTE

- New Jersey English Journal
- Conferences and Webinars
- Blog and Newsletter
- Professional Development

Tips To Avoid Disqualification

1. Students may submit a maximum of one entry in each category (one poem, one short story and one essay).
2. Teachers may submit up to ten entries for their students in each genre. Surplus entries will be disqualified.
3. The file submitted must be anonymous. Submissions with a student's name, school or class will be disqualified

Submission Links

Deadline 1-10-25

Essay

SCAN ME

https://forms.gle/PuYRkCEbGsP1eJ2N9

Short Story

SCAN ME

https://forms.gle/FJSK9ymYqAFfzMDh9

Poetry

https://forms.gle/BgfiXETTy7VNKbqv8

SCAN ME

Awards

1st Place Gold Winners in poetry, short story and personal essay=certificate and $150.00 prize money
2nd Place Silver Winners in poetry, short story and personal essay = certificate and $75.00 prize money
3rd Place Bronze Winners in poetry, short story and personal essay = certificate and $50.00 prize money

Teachers receive professional development hours upon submission from students

First place winners will receive recognition on the New Jersey Governor's Awards in Arts Education (NJGAAE) webpage and a medal.

MORE INFORMATION: njctewriting@gmail.com.

It Was Our Classroom

ADELE BRUNI ASHLEY
Teachers College

When I was in second grade, I had a teacher who was known as a bit of a maverick. Every other second-grade classroom at our elementary school sat in rows and spent their days neatly, dutifully completing worksheets in preparation for our standardized tests. I could see one of those other classrooms across the courtyard each morning from my perch on the windowsill where I was completing my own worksheets on a clipboard. Some of my classmates had their clipboards and were curled up in our puppet theater, a refrigerator box in the corner of the room. Others were sitting at desks. Our teacher told us that we too had to do those worksheets each morning and to do them well. But in the afternoons, we took a trip to Kenya, boarding a plane in the school gym and then "flying" back to our transformed classroom. We pored through the *World Book Encyclopedia* (this was in the 1980s) searching for information about the word or phrase our teacher would post daily to spark our inquiry. We wrote stories and plays and shared them with one another in messy performances. I can still feel over 30 years later the absorbing, intense joy of that second-grade classroom. Yet we completed those worksheets, took the standardized tests, and somehow those practices didn't sap our joy. They amplified it.

How did our teacher do it? I remember being excited when he distributed those worksheets; he framed the whole enterprise as a kind of game. We were up against a force beyond all of us and while we would do what others deemed important, we would do it our way. As a seven-year-old, I didn't know who was behind those worksheets and those tests. What was important, though, was that our teacher was part of the "we"; he was on our side as we faced those expectations. We had a sense that we were pushing back together to preserve our classroom. This was critical, too—it was *our* classroom. He created openings for us to make choices: where to be physically, what to read at times, what to write. Those openings offered us ownership.

Years later, as a secondary ELA teacher myself, I found that things were quite different; we didn't have as much time together as we had in that second-grade classroom, and we couldn't necessarily rearrange the physical space. The stakes of those standardized tests were often higher. But there were some elements of that second-grade experience from which I continued to draw. I attempted to position myself as a coach alongside my students, acknowledging that we are all up against the same demands and were all on the same side. I reminded students that those standardized tests were externally generated, and we worked to determine what content and skills those tests valued. We discussed the extent to which those values exemplified on a given standardized test aligned with our own; this test may be what others believe English to be, but what do *we* believe is most essential to the teaching of English? How would *we* evaluate the work of our class if given the option? These were questions we took up together.

I have a three-year-old son who loves to hear books aloud, and often it's the same book on repeat. Lately, that book has been

Dr. Seuss's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* So I've been thinking about the Grinch and his assumption that the joy in *Who*-ville resides in the trappings of Christmas—the presents, the decorations, the food. As a teacher, I assume sometimes that the joy in my classroom is similarly contained, that it lives in specific assignments (that multigenre project!) or lessons (acting out scenes from *A Raisin in the Sun*!). But I'm beginning to understand that it's bigger than that, this joy.

My second-grade teacher was cultivating joy and collective classroom ownership by building relationships. When pushing back against school policy, he was forging those bonds by demarcating "us" versus "them." Within our classroom, he was encouraging us to work together on small group tasks. When we worked individually, he was urging us to offer that work to the class as a whole—to tell our classmates about that whale book we were reading on our own or to share the picture we had been sketching of an igloo. That sharing was never evaluative; we were never asked to critique or praise our classmates' work. We were asked to engage, to talk about what their work made us think and feel. We were weaving connections by gifting to one another our individual thinking.

Over the past several years, I've stepped out of the ELA classroom as I teach secondary ELA teachers, and we all grapple with what it means to be an educator right now. My students struggle to decide what texts they can teach and what kinds of conversations they can initiate. Some of my students chafe against the demands their school contexts and both the overt and subtle ways those schools stifle teaching and learning. But even as they venture into the fraught, complex realities of our current educational landscape, my students are determined to create their own joy-filled classrooms. They're designing classroom environments in which students can make meaningful choices about what and how they learn. They're crafting projects through which their secondary students collaborate with purpose both within and outside the classroom. They're standing at the classroom door to greet their students individually, and they're pausing as they circulate to check homework to ask about a recent school basketball game. They're centering relationships with their students and among their students.

We may not be the *Whos* in our ELA classrooms, holding hands in a circle and singing. Our joy as students and teachers, however, has the same source: It emerges from and is sustained by our connectedness.

ADELE BRUNI ASHLEY is a full-time lecturer in the Teaching of English MA program at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is the co-founder and director of Literacy Unbound at the Center for the Professional Education of Teachers (CPET) at Teachers College, a professional learning program bringing together teachers and students to co-create original performance pieces inspired by literature. She can be contacted at azb2104@tc.columbia.edu.

Writing Horror: Culturally Responsive Genre Literacy

CARLY BERWICK
Montclair State University

"The mother is upstairs with a cord, a saw, a garbage bag, a black light, and some cleaning supplies." This suggestive line occurs early on in a 1500-word horror story by an 8th grader, who goes on to imagine a series of gruesome deaths in an otherwise ordinary suburban neighborhood. Encouraging students to share their deep knowledge of horror video shorts unlocked a well of creativity in my 8th grade English Language Arts class in a northeastern city. This case study of horror writing explores how student-led culturally responsive genre discovery can connect to existing curricular mandates, affirm student knowledge, and allow for sustained and engaged student work through co-constructed learning that draws on and cultivates the joys of shared fandom.

Creating culturally responsive or relevant pedagogy implicates literacy and literary genres, both in what we allow into the classroom and what we keep out. Classroom texts that help students perceive other cultures and allow them to see themselves are a fundamental part of a culturally responsive literacy classroom (Sims Bishop 1990). A long-standing body of literature affirms the importance and effectiveness of giving students access to diverse texts (Ebe 2010; Tan and Ma 2021). Culturally responsive or relevant pedagogy refers to the entire classroom environment and approach (Ladson-Billings 1995) and has been shown to improve school outcomes in the United States for historically marginalized non-White or low-income students (Cherfas 2021; Dee and Penner 2021; Yu 2022). But finding and igniting interest for students can require moving outside traditional texts and genres. Culturally responsive genre literacy offers a new way of thinking about connecting with students who did not see their out-of-school literacy interests and obsessions reflected in their classrooms.

Recognizing genre in fandoms can be a way to expand texts and voices in the ELA classroom. Genre literacy has also been conceptualized through bringing in texts that are part of fandoms and analyzing fandom culture in the classroom (Jones and Storm 2022, 2023). Fandoms, write Jones and Storm, "are often places that center joy as fans of focal texts share passionate intensities, discuss the text's aesthetic properties, dream up new stories, write themselves into existence, and even shift shared imaginaries" (2023, 2). Even with texts by diverse authors, students may not see their voices and passions reflected in the traditional English classroom, with its focus on academic responses to prescribed texts. Students encounter and transform texts outside the classroom in their fandom communities, however, which offer opportunities for joyful teaching and learning in shared exploration.

Horror, in particular, is a genre that is touched on in school mainly through the works of Poe and in complex literary fiction such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Works devoted to the supernatural and terrifying are everywhere in student's lives—in popular films, comics, and shared oral traditions—and have devoted online fandoms. Moreover, Black horror in film and stories is increasingly seen as a reclaiming of Black American history and experience. As Gabrielle Bellot wrote in

2019 in *The New York Times* about the current cultural prominence of Black horror movies by practitioners such Jordan Peele, "horror is, after all, a safe way to experience our deepest fears without actually having to confront them.... We have the luxury of turning away, of closing our eyes." At the same time, Black horror "seeks to capture the all-too-real fear of walking through America in a Black body and, with ghosts and clones and body-swapping conspiracies, it becomes an intentionally exaggerated, baroque realism" (Bellot 2019). The stories generated in our classroom featured beheadings, blood, and betrayals, fantastical exaggerations of experiences and emotions that are both culturally specific and redolent of adolescence in general. At the same time, since the writers themselves are in control of the narrative, Black and brown youth can experience both mastery of text and of history, writing out of existence the undying "vampires" of racism (Love 2019) and outmoded horror tropes such as Black characters dying first (Corbitt 2023).

Following student insight and genre interests, we discovered joy, curiosity, and shared scholarship through connecting the genre of YouTube horror shorts to the tradition of 19th-century Gothic horror. For context, this case study focuses on students in a "basic skills" class, in which students are reading below grade level, according to district screening tests, yet show passionate and involved reading and writing habits outside these tests. In a unit focused on the appeal of suspense in narrative, students read mysteries and short stories by Edgar Allan Poe and completed literary analyses. While all the students were BIPOC, they did not explicitly address race but created characters who were either like themselves, their families, and their friends in their narratives or were drawn from other fandoms such as anime and *Avatar*. They wrote detailed fictions about school intruders, white vans and haunted houses, and parents and children facing monsters and demons at home and in forests. This paper documents a process for unearthing student genre interest outside stereotypes or pre-existing cultural associations through four guiding principles.

Principle 1: Engage in Constant Youth Ethnography

Be watchful for and encourage student enthusiasm and interest as it bubbles up in relation to existing curriculum.

When I asked what features of horror and suspense students already knew, one student jumped up to ask if they could load a scary video on our classroom monitor. We agreed, as long as it was classroom-appropriate and did not feature body horror. This student's desire to share ignited our "scary story" unit. Other students asked to share their favorite scary shorts. We then collaboratively generated principles of suspenseful stories based on YouTube horror shorts. Students established the following genre and setting features: "A: Night, alone, weird empty space, squeaks and creaks, limited sight of main character OR B: Day, rules that no one can understand, danger if rules are broken." Students then composed their own stories following these features in a process of "restorying" Poe and YouTube horror shorts (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016). I had been alert to the possibility that scary stories might be generative already, however, as I had observed prior students' obsessions with Internet horror shorts, as they surfed their Chromebooks in between classes. Teachers can also formalize this inquiry by asking students to share web, TV, or movie series that they are fans of and unpack together both the meaning of the series and of fandom itself, similar to the "equity trail" procedure articulated by Jones and Storm,

designed to “harness joy and social justice” (2023, 3-4).

Principle 2: Enlist Norm Checkers

These co-ethnographers are often closer in age to students but can be anyone who is embedded in a sub-culture and aware of genre norms.

I was also made aware of the popularity of horror films through two emic observers, my own adolescent children, one of whom had previously shared with me his enthusiasm for YouTube horror shorts. The genre of horror shorts on YouTube and other social channels has several sub-genres as well, according to my co-ethnographer. These include analog horror, which is based on the found footage premise pioneered by the *Blair Witch Project* (1999), and creepypasta, a two-decade-old genre of short, first-person, paranormal Internet stories often shared a low, deadpan voice. While not every teacher has convenient adolescent norm-checkers at home, we do have colleagues and friends; one colleague is a devoted gamer, for instance, and I check in with them on video games students are experiencing as texts outside of school. In addition, once students are aware of teacher openness to expanded genres, students often volunteer their fandoms to offer potential whole-class activities and choices. After our first scary story unit, one student, for instance, introduced me to the vibrant online community of My Little Pony horror, featuring grotesque renderings and infections of the animated ponies. While some fandoms are not youth-appropriate, shared student-chosen genres tend to be within classroom norms, and teachers can articulate boundaries in the co-curation of classroom genres.

Principle 3: Social Media Scan

Look for trends and genres that might bubble up in or connect to the existing curriculum.

Social media such as YouTube and TikTok are valuable data sources, especially as both deliver genre-content similar to the user’s initial search, becoming more focused on the same genre the more the user browses that particular content. After skimming just three “creepypasta” videos on YouTube, for example, more started to populate my YouTube homepage. This not only helps keep teachers alert to student interests but also helps make them aware of student language usage. For instance, the subgenre of the “school interview” on TikTok consists of students asking others rapid-fire questions, sometimes of a personal nature, as if in a “man on the street” interview. It has genre-cousins in the hypothetical question or “would you rather” TikToks. These all could be effective genre pairings with more traditional classroom studies of ethics, journalism, or, within fiction, character conflict and dilemmas.

Principle 4: Ensure Students Recognize and Honor Student Genre Passions and Work, With Opportunities for Celebration.

After we generated our principles of horror and suspense through watching YouTube shorts, students created their own stories. Some asked to work in pairs, and several decided spontaneously to illustrate their stories, which featured some grisly scenes but followed classroom guidelines for fiction, in that no real names were used and sensitive plotlines such as self-harm or school shootings were avoided; they had enough inventive material without that. All students in this class wrote their horror stories within the originally scheduled time as well, something that occurred with no other assignment over the marking period. I printed each student’s story, and they made

book covers and stapled or sewed the book binding. Students could choose whether they wanted their book displayed in the school hallway, which they all chose to do.

Through engaging in ongoing youth ethnographic research, recruiting norm checkers or emic participants for information, using social media as a data source, and celebrating student fandoms and genre knowledge, teachers are better prepared to understand, respond to, and even propose new classroom genres for students to explore and connect to the existing curriculum. Horror shorts on YouTube helped reinforce and extend ideas of suspense and Gothic horror from our Poe study and engaged students so thoroughly that they not only completed the assignment but were critical to developing it. In the end-of-marking-period survey, five of fourteen students wrote that of all their work, the scary story was the work that they were proud of and that they would like to write more. Alertness to culture outside our classrooms can help us be responsive when students allude to it through their own interests, enthusiasms, and desire to transform or escape their worlds with heightened imaginations.

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Finding Joy through Vulnerability in the English Classroom

DARLENE CALDERÓN
Fairfield University

KAYLA SULLIVAN
E. O. Smith High School

EMILY R. SMITH
Fairfield University

There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.
– Leonard Cohen

In the past few years, moments of joy in the English language arts classrooms have felt tragically few and far between. Too often, in fact, these moments of joy feel like interruptions to the official curriculum and "real" work of the classroom: learning to skillfully read, write and speak the approved curriculum. The unexpected moments when we have a laugh with our students, when we pause to connect with their pain, when we put the curriculum aside to help our students feel seen—these are the cracks in our teaching that let the light in. As we—two English teachers and an English educator—reflected on moments of joy in our classrooms, we realized that our most joyful moments tend to occur outside of the "expected." They surfaced in moments of vulnerability and authentic human connection, when we showed students our humanness and let them show us theirs.

When Emily invited Darlene and Kayla, her former English education students, to reflect on their experiences with joy in their secondary English classrooms, we found commonality in their experiences with joy and vulnerability. While we expected to identify joy in moments of high engagement or students' success, we instead found joy in moments where we let down our guard and provided space for vulnerability. We resonated with the words of Gholdy Muhammad, who writes, "Joy is fun and celebratory, yet it…is also the embodiment of, learning of, and practice of self and humanity, and care for and help for humanity and the earth" (70). In what follows, we look inside Darlene's and Emily's classrooms to see how joy emerged from vulnerability, echoing Brené Brown's notion that vulnerability and joy are inextricably linked. We conclude with thoughts about how we might prepare English teachers to allow vulnerability in their teaching so that these rarer moments of joy, these "cracks" in our lessons, become the norm rather than the exception.

Teaching to Heal: Navigating Pain to Reclaim Joy

I was a few weeks shy of completing my student teaching experience. I had been assigned to a school in an affluent, predominately white district. However, I was fortunate in that my classes were some of the most racially and socioeconomically diverse in the entire school. My Latinx identity—something that I'd long been taught to suppress in most academic contexts—suddenly gave me an unforeseen advantage in the classroom. Not only did I feel comfortable engaging in difficult

conversations about race and discrimination, but my experiences growing up with immigrant parents allowed me to connect more easily with my first- and second-generation students, including one student named Rahim (pseudonym). Rahim is a first-generation Nigerian American student who instantly bonded with me. Our relationship developed through the exchange of stories about our respective upbringings in non-white, immigrant households, including our difficulties publicly "claiming" our respective cultural identities and our reflex to "code-switch" in predominately white spaces. However, I never shared these stories with the entire class; rather, they were strictly reserved for one-on-one interactions. My reluctance to incorporate more of myself into the classroom would come to haunt me weeks later when Rahim, in a moment of vulnerability, uttered the words “my brother died.”

The revelation, in which Rahim revealed that he'd intentionally kept his brother's death a secret, prompted me to reflect on my own teaching practices. Up until that moment, I had been happy with my teaching: I created units that were connected to critical social issues, centered around diverse texts, and that encouraged critical dialogue. I had done everything necessary to cultivate a safe, culturally responsive classroom environment. Yet, here was a student who not only suffered an immense personal loss, but who chose to process that loss alone. Like his Nigerian identity, he felt safer keeping parts of his humanity—his suffering—hidden. Even with all of my “classroom successes,” Rahim’s confession threw all the brokenness around me into sharp relief.

For days afterward, I felt lost. What could I, as an English teacher, do to help my students heal? How could I help them create a pathway toward joy? Then, it hit me: the answer was in the content. Specifically, I needed to draw on the emotional core of the content to let more of "me" and my students into the classroom. Incorporating more of myself into the content would bridge the psychic chasm that existed between me and students like Rahim. By incorporating instruction that was grounded in vulnerability, we could move toward a culture of joy.

I discarded everything I had planned for those final weeks and started from scratch. I began sharing stories about my life and my family to help contextualize and humanize the content I was teaching. For instance, a text depicting linguicism became an opportunity to share stories about my family’s reluctance to speak Spanish in public. My white students—many of whom had been reluctant to talk about race in previous weeks—began speaking more candidly about their emotional responses to the content. My students of color began sharing snippets of their personal lives. Even Rahim, who often avoided sharing personal details about his life in front of his classmates, began opening up. He now felt comfortable talking about his Nigerian heritage, his struggles with reconciling his dual identities, and his experiences as a Black teen in America. A small, imperceptible "crack" had formed in his emotional armor—one that allowed joy to flow in.

In the year since I student taught, Rahim and I have stayed in contact. Recently, he caught me up on all the latest details of his life, including a student cultural event he helped organize. He directed me to a thirty-second video of the event: a throng of students dancing to Caribbean music against a backdrop of various national flags. Among the sea of colored fabric, I noticed the familiar colors of the Nigerian flag. The image prompted me to ask Rahim why he decided to help organize the event. He

explained that, as a Black person in an affluent district, he's always felt like an outsider. Opening up—allowing himself to be vulnerable in front of his white peers—would destroy the image of the assimilated, first-generation American he worked so hard to curate. "Then you came, and you were so open and real with us…. It changed me."

Listening to his words, I realized something. The practice of storytelling allowed my students to harness a fundamental aspect of their humanity: their capacity for vulnerability. Giving students permission to express vulnerability in the classroom is an act of empowerment—an act that helps create space for connection, healing, and joy.

Fostering Collective Joy by Centering Vulnerability

In my teacher preparation program, we learned all about how to get students engaged in the content. We focused heavily on how to incorporate high interest topics and culturally responsive lessons. Despite all attempts to foster an inclusive and joyful learning environment, my students were uncomfortable interacting with one another. On paper, I was doing everything right. I was creating lessons where students could see themselves in the readings. I was making space for getting-to-know-you activities, free writes, and high-interest debates. In spite of my efforts, the students and the environment lacked enthusiasm. There were small glimpses of enthusiasm at the beginning of class when I allowed the students to partake in five-minute debates on topics of their choosing. While the students were interested in the debate topics, once the five minutes were up, they went back into their shells.

As a first year teacher, I was feeling immensely discouraged. I spent the first two months of the school year doing everything I could to cultivate enthusiasm and engagement with my students. I was about ready to give up when an unexpected source of joy emerged organically in my classroom.

On this particular day the debate topic was: "Nature versus Nurture," and the debate morphed into a heated discussion regarding whether all serial killers are sociopaths.

Since completing a murder mystery assignment focused on using textual evidence to best support a claim, the students showed a certain proclivity toward discussing serial killers. The students yelled back and forth with oddly specific facts about mental illness and serial killers. It was clear that this was a topic of high interest for the class.

With one minute left, the students reached a stalemate. They presented all of the facts and ideas they could come up with, so they turned to me to ask, "Ms. S., can you Google it for us? Has every serial killer been diagnosed as a sociopath or psychopath?"

"Be careful," Ms. S., "administration will flag your search history like they do to us! Search it on your phone, just in case!"

As I pressed enter on my Google search, a loud alarm sounded. I looked at my students in confusion and they stared back quizzically. They began laughing hysterically as they realized that the alarm belonged to the 5-minute timer I set at the beginning of each debate.

"You should see your face right now, Ms. S. It looks like you saw a ghost."

Rather than trying to play off this moment and maintain my "authority," I let out the biggest belly laugh.

The genuine laughter and enjoyment that the students obtained from this moment was a "crack" that allowed joy and light into our classroom through an unexpected moment of genuine human connection. This interaction broke the ice in our classroom. Following this moment, I saw my students blossom as they felt more connected to me

as a human being. Rather than feeling intimidated or disconnected from me, in this moment the students saw me as someone who had the same emotions as them. It was my vulnerability that allowed the students to open up and experience true joy in my classroom. While I did not plan for this moment, I did not shut it down and allowed all of us to soak in the moment. I realize, now, how important it is to give space to these moments of connection and allow myself to be vulnerable with my students. Following this moment, my attitude and demeanor in my classroom were forever altered. Rather than maintaining a hard exterior, I softened and allowed my students to see me as a human being first and a teacher second. The students followed suit and began to open up both to me and to each other. The true source of joy within a classroom is a teacher's willingness to show their humanity to their students.

Teaching With Vulnerability

As we reflect on these moments of our teaching, we are keenly aware of the need to be human and vulnerable with our students and allow our students to do the same. As our vignettes illustrate, our moments of vulnerability led to moments of joy through authentic connection. English language arts classrooms that nurture all aspects of our humanness—not just the academic ones—seem more likely to create these moments.

As an English educator, Emily is left wondering about the implications of our reflections on how she prepares English teachers. For years, she has prepared her teacher candidates to design engaging, accessible, and inclusive curricula. This has included instruction in learner-centered, high-impact, high-interest, and anti-racist pedagogies. She has also stressed and modeled the importance of relationships with students. These reflections underscore the need to integrate these priorities in the curricula, designing lessons that center emotional connection and support vulnerability in engaging with the curricula. For some teachers, this might feel counter-cultural, as vulnerability is often associated with weakness rather than confidence. However, our reflections suggest that these moments of vulnerability create both connection and engagement with students, nudging us towards curricula and pedagogy that nurture and savor moments of vulnerability. Emily is eager to take on this challenge, beginning with reflection on the ways in which she models vulnerability in her own teaching.

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Healing Through Expressive Writing

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On a hot spring day, a group of students—as well as teachers, administrators, and community members—sat outside on the front lawn of Asbury Park High School (APHS) in a giant U-shape. Paper tablecloths flapped in the wind, held to the tables by packages of cookies and water bottles. The creative writing teacher, Christine DeMarsico, checked the microphone for sound. Jennifer Chauhan, executive director of Project Write Now (PWN), a local literary arts nonprofit, held the printed anthologies, titled *Let Us Share*, like trophies as the students found their seats for the Writers Celebration. Meredith Z. Avakian, a spoken word artist and instructor, had spent the past year inspiring the 22 students in grades 9 through 12 to put pen to paper. The weekly class had become a sacred space in which each student was heard and respected; they poured their hearts into their notebooks and then polished their writing for publication.

A young man, J., volunteered to read his story first. Christine and the other students knew the intimate details; the class had become a family, and the sharing of words throughout the year strengthened their bond. Christine held J.'s hand as he read "The Story of Us," tears welling in his eyes, about the tragic day his sister died.

> *My world turned upside down after all of the hell that happened that very day, and I still can't get over that day. … The only way I now see her is through a photo on top of our counter. … M., I wish you were here to meet your little brother and get to hang out with him. Thank you for the memories, and for the good times, and I hope to see you again sometime.*

After he finished, Christine gave him a hug as the entire class erupted in applause. You could feel the love for J. permeating the space. Storytelling releases trauma; it creates a safe space for healing (Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999). And in these moments, it even brings joy. Joy and gratitude for our shared humanity—our genuine connections with one another.

Three years earlier in the fall of 2020, Christine had welcomed Project Write Now into her classroom. PWN was founded by Jennifer, a former high school English teacher, who was dealing with her own trauma after the loss of her parents and subsequent divorce. She wanted to give young people supportive spaces to explore their authentic selves through writing and sharing their stories. Christine had been participating in PWN's teacher writing group and immediately said yes when Jennifer suggested they co-create the Spoken Word Project for Christine's creative writing class. They both recognized the heightened anxiety and stress students were navigating due to the pandemic and the increased racial tension in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Each week over Zoom, Christine and Jennifer guided students to write how they were feeling that day; they also invited spoken word artists to join them, to perform for the students and share their inspirations for writing. One by

one, students began reading their words aloud, and a flood of thumbs-up and heart emojis appeared in the tiny black screens. At the end of class, students dropped their favorite lines they wrote into the chat and PWN's instructors wove them together into collaborative poems. For example, from "If I Ruled the World":

If I ruled the world
I'd stop world hunger
No shortages of food
We'd all be in a good mood
I would make everyone smile
And change the world
To a better place
For every color of face
In this one human race

Students were expressing their emotions—their fears, their hopes, their dreams. And in these shared experiences, they were feeling less alone. In a 2021 survey of the creative writing class conducted by PWN, 70 percent of students said that writing and sharing with the group made them feel more connected to one another. Eighty-three percent said they were likely to use writing when working through strong emotions. One student shared: "I noticed that now I can make myself feel relaxed from stressful things. I can feel my mental health improving."

English classes need to be authentic and healing spaces to transform education in this post-pandemic reality where anxiety, stress, and depression are hurting our kids. According to a recent report by YouthTruth, "depression, stress, and anxiety are the most prevalent obstacles to learning for secondary students at every grade level for six through twelve."*(*YouthTruth, 2023) How can we educate our children when they are living in a society where they can no longer be kids, are not given a voice, and are succumbing to unrealistic pressures and expectations?

Expressive writing must be at the heart of this change because writing is a means for healing and growth. Words are powerful—they create connections, love, empathy, and understanding (Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999). The partnership between Project Write Now and the creative writing class at APHS started during the pandemic when it seemed impossible to keep students engaged in teaching and learning as traditionally done. This partnership opened the door for healing and restoration during the most challenging of times.

To this day, Christine begins her class with a check-in question, followed by a writing prompt. Most days, she uses poems (poets.org is a fantastic resource), asking students to pull a line, a phrase, an idea, or an emotion and to write from it. She also uses thought-provoking questions. The prompts range from light and funny to deep and introspective. One day the question was "What is on your never to-do list?" The students engaged in a lively discussion about skydiving, snakes, and flying. Each question breaks the barrier between students and helps the group develop a bond. As September moves to January, the students become more deeply connected. The mutual respect and love invite soul growth and joy. As the school year progresses, students are empowered to learn in a safe space—to be heard, respected, and loved. If we don't see and accept our students for who they are, we cannot teach them. Expressive writing is the bridge to this transformational education.

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JENNIFER CHAUHAN Jennifer Chauhan is co-founder and executive director of Project Write Now, a literary arts nonprofit transforming individuals, organizations, and communities through writing.

CHRISTINE DEMARSICO is an English and Creative Writing teacher at Asbury Park High School. They both believe that writing can be a powerful tool, unlocking the potential for personal growth and deeper connections with others. Jennifer can be contacted at jennifer@projectwritenow.org. Christine can be contacted at christine@projectwritenow.org.

Hamlet and Happiness: How Changing Curriculum Brought Back Joy

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"We are going to have to cut *Hamlet*," Colleen said.

This decision had not come easily. Rather, during this phase of curriculum revision, we had already read or reviewed close to 75 texts in the hopes of finding the high school English holy grail - a book that the students *could* possibly and authentically enjoy. Desperately reading every list we could find, ranging from the more established *New York Times* best sellers to *Buzzfeed*'s lists of new YA novels, we had already spent months reading on our own, sharing the ones we thought had potential, and adding to an ever-growing list.

But that was not enough.

Having already scrapped Dante's *Inferno* and Camus's *The Stranger*, the last juggernaut on our list was Shakespeare. To cut him or not to cut him; that was now the question sitting on the kitchen table.

We knew that *Hamlet* was good. We knew that we had honed our craft and could make connections to popular culture and *The Lion King* that would make our seniors a little more amenable to the dense rhetoric and traumatic content. However, that was the significant issue. We needed to do the work to grab their attention, to make it likable. We faced as teachers the Sisyphean task of walking into our classes each and every day and convincing our students that this was something that they *should* like and enjoy.

And that was before we could get them to even work with the text, to conquer the standards and beyond, to encourage critical thinking and help guide them to analysis, synthesis, and sophisticated work.

We knew that what we loved about the text would become secondary to the exhaustion we would face creating lesson plans and trying to light the fire in our students. We knew that there would be joy in those brief moments that sparked when a student felt accomplished for understanding a passage, but these would be hard earned.

It was too much. It was not enough.

We knew that in order to get our students to be lifelong readers, we needed to first get them to see that reading could be something joyful. And we knew that our answer lay in contemporary texts, and, even scarier, just letting the students pick books that they wanted to read. We knew this because this is what reading has looked like in our lifetimes. As voracious readers, we know that the real joy of reading comes from finding one's fit.

This was terrifying. Our worries were many.

The shift from thinking about text to thinking about standards and skills was our first hurdle. No one wants to be the teacher who abandons the canon for so many reasons. In the twenty-first century—the canon is seen as "safe." Despite the "heartaches and the thousand natural sorrows" that the classics have (and the trigger warnings for these texts are just as long and just as varied as their contemporary counterparts), they are relatively free from the "slings and arrows" of popular opinion (please forgive the *Hamlet* references - he is gone, but not forgotten). Additionally, to

replace one of these canonical texts with something popular or contemporary is often seen as being easy. Suddenly when it is no longer a Ye Olde text, we are seen as not doing the *hard* work and comments arise that we might as well be teaching TikTok. Meanwhile, we knew we would be making resources for texts for which none are available—further reminding us that what we were doing was out of the ordinary.

Recognizing that most of our work could be done regardless of the selected text was freeing. While we still start the year reading together, our curriculum of modern memoirs and contemporary dystopias seems to sit better with our twenty-first century students. Rather than fighting for them to see the relevance of the text, it is apparent from the covers, which enables us to shift the focus from getting them to do the reading to teaching them how to do it. It is during this time that we lay the groundwork —moving our classes through the standards and establishing expectations. Through regular book chats, seminars, synthesis activities, and guided reading questions during both whole class selections and smaller group readings, we demonstrate the practices necessary for vigorous reading. By first doing this as a full class, but then allowing the students to practice these activities on a smaller scale, we prepare them for their future as independent readers.

And so the countdown to January—the time of the year when we start independent reading—begins early. Students start making TBR lists. The overwrought honors students can imagine a time when they will be able to read *for fun* for the first time in years, because having to do it *for English* makes it possible for them to carve out the time in their schedules.

Although many of them (and I) would love it if all we did was read independently for months, reading is only one of the standards that we need to focus on as English teachers. Throughout the second semester, our students are first engaged in a research-focused unit and then in a capstone, project-based learning, unit. These focus heavily on nonfiction and writing, so it is within these units that the class is also participating in their independent reading, both inside and outside of the classroom. Every week, and almost every class, has time carved out for independent reading because we know that if they see us putting value on it, and engaging in it ourselves, they will understand that we believe it is important. As their work becomes more self-directed, they are able to decide what days they read in the room and what days they do not. More often than not, the rooms are full of reading. Regular conferences, smaller standards-based assignments, and synthesizing tasks are used to assess their reading while also encouraging the students to not only make connections across texts, but also to be inspired for their next book. It is not uncommon for one book to make its way from the bookshelf to multiple readers before it is put back, with pockets of discussions happening through each exchange.

Listening to a student giggle over the expletives and potatoes of *The Martian* or passing the Taylor Jenkins Reids and Colleen Hoovers around excitedly or even enthusiastically swapping books when one doesn't fit—happy in the knowledge that they do not have to complete the book if they didn't want to (really, who would choose Dante's *Inferno*? e can't say I didn't warn him)—are moments when joy re-enters the classroom. It is in the quiet hum that happens when they read silently and the passionate recommendations that occur when another student overhears a book chat. And it is this joy that enables the students to ease into the rigor.

I did not become an English teacher to teach Shakespeare (as much as I do enjoy

him). One of the many reasons I did is because one of my greatest joys is reading—cracking the spine on a new book and falling deeper into a story. Seeing my students enabled to do the same and hearing them when they realize that they can be readers if they find the right book reminds me why we do the work we do.

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“Joy and Pain” Strategies for Transformative Learning in the English Language Arts Curriculum

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As a child, I would visit my grandmother on Saturday mornings, when she would play the song “Joy and Pain” by Frankie Beverly and Maze in the kitchen while she cooked breakfast. The lyrics of the song “Joy and Pain” derive from a melodious composition by the renowned soul ensemble Maze, established by the talented Frankie Beverly in Philadelphia in the 1970s. The song "Joy and Pain" captures the complex nature of the duality of human existence reflective of historical struggles and triumphs experienced by the Black community, serving as a vessel for shared emotions and resilience.

Significantly, this song held a deep significance for my grandmother, and songs like these present in our kitchen on Saturday mornings transformed her home into the hallowed ground where joy and pain resonated harmoniously. In much the same way, storytelling holds great importance in Black spiritual traditions; my maternal grandmother bestowed upon us narratives echoing this inherent duality of joy intertwining with pain. Through playing a song, my grandmother nurtured a tenacity that I now perceive as an expression of joy as resistance. Black joy activists and theorists argue that Black joy is defined as the use of feelings of joy when the oppressive world doesn’t have room for your happiness and the ability to cultivate joy regardless of oppressive factors (Packnett, 2017).

Positionality

As a Black woman, scholar, mother, daughter, and teacher educator in English Language Arts (ELA), my work is deeply influenced by a commitment to foster healing and resilience through culturally responsive and healing-centered pedagogies. Throughout my career, I have taught at various educational levels, worked as a community organizer, and researched integrating culturally responsive teaching and healing-centered approaches to create inclusive and empowering learning environments. My experiences showed me the importance of incorporating healing into the classroom pedagogies and practices to impact student well-being and academic success.

Literature Review: Joy as Resistance in Educational Frameworks

Healing-centered pedagogies are educational approaches that prioritize the well-being and healing of students. These pedagogies go beyond trauma-sensitive methods and aim to create an environment that fosters emotional and mental healing. Integrating practices that promote joy, connection, and cultural responsiveness, healing-centered pedagogies seek to address the emotional needs of students. As a result, healing-centered practitioners hold space for the feelings of discomfort and trauma the curriculum may bring up (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Ginwright, 2015). While healing-centered approaches are starting to be commonly used by educators, there is little empirical or qualitative evidence on the

functions of these practices. In addition, even less studied is the role that joy as resistance plays in the effectiveness of delivering a healing-sensitive curriculum.

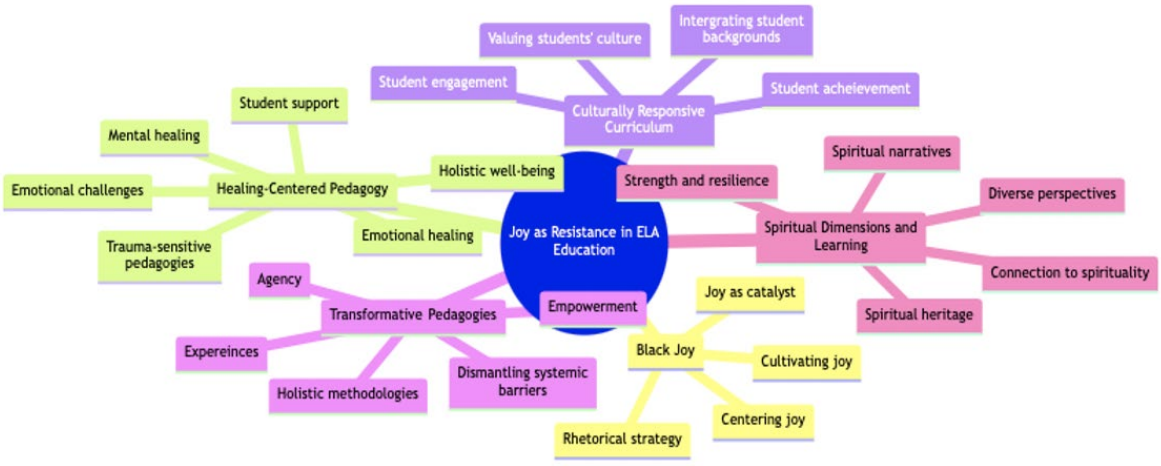
Newer research in a healing-centered curriculum focuses on joy as a rhetorical strategy for liberation and freedom called "joy as resistance" (Lu, 2019; Joy 2017). “Joy” in this context is used as a nonviolent communal approach to resisting the oppressive conditions of society. This fortitude takes on heightened significance within ELA instruction, where heterogeneous perspectives and tales constitute fundamental elements of a holistic and empowering syllabus. Embracing and comprehending these narratives not only enhances our educational terrain but also fosters a society that is more embracing and understanding. In English education, the ability to adapt and persevere assumes paramount significance. A comprehensive curriculum that empowers students necessitates the inclusion of a myriad of perspectives and narratives. By embracing and comprehending these diverse stories, we not only enhance our educational sphere but also cultivate an all-encompassing society characterized by empathy and inclusivity.

Furthermore, scholarly research emphasizes the crucial role of incorporating student cultures, communities, and diverse perspectives as a fundamental aspect of effective teaching (Gay, 2010). Culture-based pedagogies, advocating for a departure from traditional curriculum structures, have been found to be a significant factor in facilitating student achievement (Gay, 2010). The literature also underscores the need for educators to move beyond exposing students solely to instances of epistemic violence in society by incorporating social justice and trauma-informed contemplative practices (Kuyken et al., 2013; Lief, 2012). This is particularly relevant in K-12 classrooms, where a primarily white teaching force (NCES, 2019) grapples with the implementation and sustainability of culturally responsive practices, along with the challenge of maintaining an emancipatory curriculum in urban school districts (Borrero, Flores de la Cruz, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Samuels, 2018). Consequently, the current academic discourse increasingly focuses on healing-centered education and practices within educational settings (Ginwright, 2015).

Framework for Joy as Resistance in ELA

In the ELA classroom, the concept of joy as resistance creates a powerful lens through which students can engage with literature, language, and the world around them. The framework is rooted in the idea that joy is not just an emotional state but also a tool for challenging narratives, fostering resilience, creating inclusive environments, and cultivating autonomy. The visual (Figure 1) illustrates how this framework can be operationalized in ELA instruction, including key strategies, outcomes, and theoretical underpinnings that support the integration of joy and resistance as a transformative process. The framework, which extends beyond the instructional techniques, incorporates healing-centered pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, transformative pedagogy, and spiritual dimensions of learning. It draws on the works of Gholdy Muhammad, bell hooks, and Cynthia Dillard to deepen the connection between joy, resistance, and educational practice in the fight against oppression in the cultivation of resilient students.

Figure 1.



The significance of joy in ELA is highlighted in Gholdy Muhammad's seminal work, *Unearthing Joy: A Guide to Culturally and Historically Responsive Teaching and Learning*, where she intricately explores how the cultivation of joy is a radical act of resistance within educational settings (2023). Muhammad underscores the significance of infusing joy into education, particularly for marginalized communities, as it empowers students to assert their identities, navigate challenges, and resist the constraints of oppressive structures that impede their intellectual and emotional growth (Muhammad, 2023).

Further enhancing this framework is the insights of bell hooks, as articulated in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. hooks advocates for the transformative potential of joy in the educational landscape, asserting that it disrupts traditional power dynamics in the classroom and creates a space where marginalized voices can be heard and validated. In the context of ELA, incorporating hooks' perspective reinforces that joy is not merely an emotional state but a deliberate and impactful form of resistance against prevailing educational norms, allowing for a more inclusive and empowering learning experience.

Cynthia Dillard's (2006) work in *On Spiritual Strivings: Transforming an African American Woman's Academic Life*, offers a perspective on how joy as resistance can be applied as a framework in the realm of ELA. Dillard explores the intersection of spirituality, identity, and academia with insights on how the idea of joyous resistance can live in educational settings (2006). The emphasis on spirituality as a source of strength and resilience draws from the long history of Black culture, where spirituality has been a central pillar of cultural identity and resistance. In the ELA classroom, this can be integrated by incorporating literature that explores diverse spiritual and cultural perspectives so that students can connect with their spiritual heritage and find joy in the exploration of these narratives. Additionally, Dillard's exploration of transformative learning experiences can inform ELA pedagogy to disrupt conventional norms and Eurocentric biases so that students feel liberated to express their unique voices and challenge dominant narratives (2006). The transformative learning Dillard advocates for features the

recognition and affirmation of students through text selection that integrates the emotional realities of students, discussions that acknowledge the spiritual aspects of humans, and texts that contribute joy as resistance by embracing the holistic nature of learning (2006).

Joy in Practice in ELA

Through an exploration of the framework, there are three different strategies that ELA teachers can easily apply to their teaching toolkit. First, incorporating culturally sensitive literature circles allows English teachers to incorporate joy as resistance into their instruction. Through the use of texts (Muhammad, 2023), educators can carefully select literature that reflects the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students. Intentional text selection allows students to express their identities, engage in conversations about diverse experiences, and collectively challenge the boundaries of traditional literary norms. By creating culturally sensitive literature circles, teachers create an inclusive environment that values the diversity of opinions in the classroom.

Based on bell hooks' (1994) innovative insights, English teachers can use creative expression as a pedagogical approach. By encouraging students to explore literature through a variety of creative media such as art, poetry, and drama, educators disrupt traditional power relationships and create fun and inclusive learning environments (hooks 1994). This approach is not only consistent with the idea that joy is a conscious form of resistance but also allows students to transcend the boundaries of traditional education. Through creative expression, students can enhance their interpretations of texts, share personal stories, and engage with literary themes in ways that closely fit their unique perspectives.

By incorporating Cynthia Dillard's (2006) perspective on spirituality as a source of resilience, English teachers can enrich their curriculum by integrating spiritual stories and personal testimonies. The inclusion of texts that explore different spiritual perspectives is consistent with Dillard's emphasis on recognizing the spiritual aspects of learning (2006). Additionally, providing a platform for students to share their testimonies, whether related to spirituality or personal growth, can be a joyful act of resistance. By filling the curriculum with stories that embrace the holistic nature of learning, educators actively participate in the framework of joy as resistance in ELA, creating an empathetic and understanding classroom community.

Sending You to Your Joy: Reflective Practice

In conclusion, joy as resistance in ELA can show a profound and transformative framework for educators and practitioners. Through each of the scholar's perspectives (hooks, 1994; Dillard, 2006; Muhammad, 2023), there is a deliberative centering and understanding of the impact of joy as an act of resistance against oppressive educational settings. Incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy, fostering transformative pedagogies, and recognizing the cultural spiritual dimensions of learning are strategies that educators can actively engage with in a joyful resistance that empowers students, amplifies diverse voices, and establishes inclusive learning environments. This framework challenges traditional education paradigms, through the centering of more holistic and inclusive methodologies. I believe this framework calls for educators to not only actively embrace diverse perspectives and celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity, but also provide students with an opportunity to connect with their narratives. The centering

of joy as resistance can transform the ELA curriculum into a catalyst for empowerment, agency, and transformative experiences.

I hope practitioners begin to recognize that joy is not just an emotional state but a dynamic force that disrupts traditional power dynamics, challenges exclusionary structures, and fosters resilience in the face of adversity. In weaving together, the insights of bell hooks, Gholdy Muhammad, and Cynthia Dillard and the broader framework of joy as resistance, educators will be better prepared to navigate and reshape the narratives in the ELA discipline. Through embracing this transformative approach, teachers will lay the foundation for an educational landscape that nurtures with the capacity to find joy even in the face of challenges, embodying the resilience and empowerment reflective of broader Black American experiences, as heard in those soulful Saturday mornings in my grandmother's kitchen to the tune of Maze.

Questions for Reflective Practice

1. How can I incorporate more culturally responsive texts into my curriculum that highlight the themes of joy and resistance into my curriculum?
2. In what ways can creative expression be used to help students explore and express joy as a form of resistance in their engagement with literature?
3. How can I create a classroom environment that celebrates and integrates students' experiences of joy and resistance in their spiritual or personal narratives?
4. What specific strategies can I implement to foster and highlight joy within my teaching?

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Teaching Writing: Fostering Joy in Writing Through "Commentarying"

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For the past 15 years, I have run an after-school education center specializing in reading and writing instruction for students of various age groups. Despite my role as an English writing teacher, I must confess that I secretly disliked teaching writing. My approach was often rigid, focused on perfection, and lacked the joy and creativity inherent in writing. This perspective shifted dramatically when I returned to graduate school. In a Rhetoric and Teaching course, I engaged in weekly commentary assignments on assigned readings. This process transformed my perception of writing and, consequently, the way I teach it. This transformation also positively affected my students' attitudes toward writing.

In my small private education center, serving about 60 students from kindergarten through 12th grade, I work as the education director overseeing three core subjects: sciences, math, and English. Additionally, I serve as a college consultant and teach standardized test preparation classes, including the SAT, LSAT, and MCAT verbal sections. Most of the students are of South or East Asian American descent and are enrolled in programs that are one to two grade levels higher than those offered at their schools. Admission to the program requires an online application, school report cards, and an interview process. Students are placed in appropriate classes based on these results. While most students are enrolled in enrichment classes, the English lessons focus on improving their reading and writing skills for their respective grade levels.

Teaching writing at my center came with its own set of challenges. As a writing teacher, I often felt unmotivated due to my students' reactions and attitudes toward writing. I doubted their ability to produce quality writing. Regardless of gender or grade, they entered my class with the same dejected demeanor as Eeyore from *Winnie-the-Pooh*. The routine was predictable: hesitant entries, monotone queries about writing tasks, and collective sighs upon hearing the day's ELA assignment.

Most of my students are second-generation Asian Americans. Their immigrant parents, facing English language barriers, particularly in legal or official matters, enroll them in my education center, valuing reading and writing as a crucial skill in the U.S. While these students excel academically in their predominantly White schools in Long Island and are fluent English speakers, they prioritize math and sciences over literature. Their academic reports often show high grades, but they falter in English, with feedback highlighting "missing essay homework" or a "weak thesis."

As their private ELA teacher, I aimed to boost students' school grades by teaching them the dreaded "five-paragraph" essay. This rigid format, drilled into students' minds from elementary school and emphasized in standardized exams, insists on clear writing with an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion—because apparently, that's the only way to write academically. As a result, I felt obligated to follow what's being taught in most public schools, and since that's also how I was educated, I ended up emphasizing academic over creative writing, echoing Moffett's concern about prioritizing exposition writing from prescribed topics

(Moffett 1988). In class, I highlighted every grammatical error, expressing my frustration with remarks like, "Didn't I explain this before?" My meticulous feedback, laden with Google Docs comments, dampened their writing enthusiasm. This rigorous focus on perfection hindered their expression (Flower and Hayes 1981) and inadvertently fostered a dislike for ELA and writing.

My Changed Perception of Writing

My perspective on writing and teaching transformed during my graduate Rhetoric and Teaching course. Initially, I expected our weekly commentaries to be formal essays adhering to strict academic standards. However, our professor encouraged personal reflections and interpretations, promoting a more relaxed and engaging writing style. This approach contrasted sharply with my Applied Linguistics background, where using first-person pronouns in academic writing was discouraged.

My professor assigned weekly commentary writing tasks on Canvas. Each week, he would introduce the lesson with a brief explanation, such as: "This week, we'll expand our examination of academic writing by reading articles that critique how it is taught and question its hegemony in college prep and first-year college writing courses. We'll also read Moffett on the relationship between personal and academic writing and how writing is construed or misconstrued in school writing assignments."

He would then outline the writing task: "Writing Assignment: Two Parts: 1. Post a commentary on the discussion forum for this week on one or more of the assigned (or recommended) articles and reply to or participate in an ongoing discussion. 2. Write and post a brief reflection on the two related questions or problems: 'Why I Write and When I Want to Write.'"

I had never done assignments like this as a PhD student and never considered this kind of writing to be academic, especially since we were using first-person pronouns. However, as educated adults, we provided supporting details and appropriate citations in our commentaries. We didn't follow the strict five-paragraph essay format, but we successfully conveyed our opinions with intended meanings backed up by scholarly sources.

After completing our readings, we would individually post our honest reactions and opinions, responding to the writing prompts. Some students wrote extensively, while others wrote less, depending on how much they resonated with the readings. We openly posted constructive criticisms and critical questions under our classmates' postings. What was wonderful about these commentary assignments was that the professor also completed the same writing assignments, posting his feedback and reactions to each student's posts as if he were one of the students.

Although I am an ELA teacher, I was not used to sharing my writing with anyone, and the thought of posting my writing on Canvas for others to read was intimidating. Honestly, I think I was more worried about how my professor and peers would judge my writing. Because I spent hours thinking about how to compose my first commentary, I empathized with how my own students struggled with writing. However, after reading my professor's encouraging comments, which showed genuine interest in what I wrote, I smiled; I felt like an elementary school child who received 100% on her test for the first time.

Through Canvas commentaries, the professor shared personal stories, fostering mutual understanding among us. I discovered that two classmates, like me, had experienced second language acquisition of English after immigrating as children. Our discussions also provided insights into their Arab cultural backgrounds. Such exchanges,

as Heath (2009) points out, promote intercultural learning from experiences outside the classroom, aligning with González et al.'s (2005) "funds of knowledge" concept. Recognizing that good writing isn't always formal, I quickly introduced commentary writing to my after-school education center students.

In my typical ELA writing class, there are a maximum of four students placed according to their reading levels that I personally determine based on my teaching experience. On the first day of the class, we choose our reading list together for the entire 15 weeks of the semester during which we meet once a week for 1.5 hours. During each 1.5-hour session, I introduce the literature that the students will be reading for that week and assign a thought-provoking essay question pertaining to the reading. The students are required to read the entire book over the week before the next lesson and submit the essay through Google Classroom. In the following week, I introduce a new book and go over each of the four students' essays by projecting the writing on the wall. We verbally edit the essay together focusing on grammatical aspects and encouraging students to suggest improvements to make the writing better. This system works because students learn to organize their thoughts better and write with correct grammar, but it doesn't bring the same joy I experienced in my graduate class with commentary writing.

In my traditional ELA classes, the focus was on perfecting the five-paragraph essay, which often stifled creativity and enthusiasm. After discovering the joy and freedom of commentary writing, I decided to bring this approach to my students. The difference was immediate and profound. I started to post questions similar to those my professor posed on Canvas, and the result was a success. The students engaged more actively, shared their honest reactions and opinions, and felt more motivated to write. This approach fostered a more dynamic and interactive learning environment, making the writing process more enjoyable and encouraging for everyone involved.

If it were not for the commentary writing assignments, I would not fully understand what is on the minds of every student. Typically, the more vocal students dominate classroom discussions, often overshadowing others. However, the commentary writing assignments provide an opportunity for my quieter students to express their thoughts and opinions, often using textual references to support their ideas in a natural manner.

Here is a brief excerpt or a screenshot of how my all-male middle school students, in grades 7 and 8, responded to one of the weekly commentary assignments: "Read Act I of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare and feel free to write anything in the commentary section of the Google Classroom about the reading. Feel free to respond to one or more of your classmate's responses." This class happens to consist of students who are generally disengaged and express a strong dislike for reading. Therefore, I instructed them to write about whatever they wished after reading the first act and purposely did not assign any specific theme for discussion.

James (Pseudonym)

When I was reading Act I in the book, A Midsummer Night's Dream, I wondered why love played such a big role in the story. I am sure this will be further elaborated later in the book, but since I cannot read any further in the book, I decided to figure that out myself. I think that since the book has fairies in it, some of the characters in the book may have loved each other because of a spell or a form of magic. This is very possible because there is not much information on Oberon and Titania in the first act. They are the king and queen of the fairies and could be there for evil or be there for good.
I also feel that if there is this much love between characters in the story, it will eventually have to do with the plot of the story and how it flows. For example, if Oberon and Titania are actually casting love spells on one of the characters and they somehow find out, they could have a battle with the fairies and possibly have somebody get hurt or even die. If this happens, the plot will be changed especially if the character is important. This is why love is currently playing a big role in the story.

Benjamin (Pseudonym)

@James

When you said that the king and queen of fairies were maybe casting love spells, that would consider them as evil. I think that there is no way of them to be good unless they helped them with a big disaster. I also agree with you that love is an important role in this story. In the beginning of the book, it started with marriage and how Hermia was in love. Maybe later in the book, love will become a huge part of it.

James (Pseudonym)

@Benjamin

When I read your commentary, I also felt that it was unfair that Hermia was forced to marry Demetrius. She should be an independent woman and be free in what she wants to do. It is unfair that the men in this story had more power and rights than women did. Since this is not based on a true story, I think that William Shakespeare purposely made the men have more power to show the reader that a world like this would not be fair and balanced.

Samuel (Pseudonym)

@James

When reading the second paragraph of your commentary, although confused at first, I believe you have read ahead to Act II but I still will comment on your commentary. I also agree with you how love does play a big part in the story and also believe this will be further elaborated in the story as there is still many pages left in the book. Although I also think it's possible for Oberon and Titania to love each other because they have fallen under a spell as this story is a fantasy and fiction, I personally do not think this is the case. In my opinion, as although it's possible for a reason to be revealed later in the story, I think that there's no actual particular reason on why they fell in love. I think it's because Shakespeare is not trying to bring the reason on why they fell in love into the spotlight, but rather the hardships, difficulties, and situations that will come along with them because they fell in love in the first place. But unfortunately, I disagree with the idea that there will be a battle between fairies and others because of them casting love spells, since this story seems to be more of a love story than a epic.

As I reviewed their commentaries the night before our session, I could not help but smile. The next day, the usually quiet students entered the classroom animatedly "disputing" what they thought would happen in the next act of the play, playfully accusing one another of reading ahead. On that day, my classroom was transformed; it was dominated by the students themselves, who were actively discussing the

complicated theme of love, while I simply facilitated the discussion.

After experiencing the benefits of commentary assignments, I decided to implement this approach in all of my ELA classes at my education center. Writing commentaries and receiving feedback, along with open discussions among all students, including the teacher, brought joy and encouraged freer expression. This experience freed me from the constraints of writing perfectly formatted academic essays.

My Students' Changed Perceptions of Writing

Through Google Classroom, my students, aged nine to 16, engage in weekly commentaries on readings and discuss with classmates. With limited class sizes, I closely monitor their input for discussion topics. Relying on Lave and Wenger's (2020) situated learning theory, which emphasizes student collaboration and a centered learning environment, I anticipated richer conversations.

By examining these commentaries, I discerned their comprehension levels, eliminating the need for reading tests or in-class essays. The students collaboratively aided each other. After ten weeks of engaging in commentary writing, I sought feedback from my students. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive, revealing a dramatic shift in their attitudes toward writing. One student mentioned, "Ms. Kim, can we do commentarying this week?" Hence, "commentarying" became the term my students coined to describe the activity, and it quickly became a staple of our classroom vocabulary for the semester.

Having students write and review commentaries on readings has reshaped their views on writing and reading. Some mentioned that it made them "feel more at ease with writing" and clarified their thoughts. Reading peers' commentaries enhanced their understanding of the material and broadened their perspectives. Anticipating peers' responses, they felt encouraged to pose questions. One student likened waiting for commentary responses to awaiting postcards from friends, eager to read their reactions.

I was pleased to see how commentary writing prompted even my shyest students to join book discussions. I also understood why some were initially reluctant to participate. My 6th grader mentioned that posting commentaries reduced his fear of making mistakes in speech or writing. He noted: "Commentaries also help with seeing how we truly feel about the book without having to say anything that we feel what is 'supposed to be said.'"

I had not realized that my students thought there was only one correct answer to my writing questions, despite framing them as open-ended and seeking their opinions. Moreover, commentary writing made them feel more connected, leading to greater mutual respect and understanding.

Typically, one or two students dominate class discussions. It was challenging to engage quieter students without sidelining the active ones. However, commentary writing allowed all to share thoughts without monopolizing class time. One student commented: "[Commentaries] are extremely fun to do as I can socialize with people and give my opinions on their opinions ... it's fun to express ideas and questions you had about the book so other classmates can answer your questions and help you out."

Another student's response showed that replying to commentaries is not just fun to do; it makes the student feel important: "Having the ability to reply is the best part about the commentary because it would make me feel much more inclusive in the experience."

Some of my students have become more open-minded and expressive in both writing

and speaking. One female 8th grader wrote: "The commentaries opened up a small part of me to just write and stop worrying too much…the commentaries let me feel a bit looser and freer when writing."

After seeing my students' willingness to truly open up and share their thoughts, I decided to try something that would foster deeper conversations on literature. I wanted my students to use the commentary space to openly discuss topics related to politics, religion, or racism that they may not be allowed to talk about in their school classrooms. Before delving into these writing tasks, we engaged in open discussions on literary pieces they commented on, such as *Black Boy, Twelfth Night, and The Stranger*. Inspired by Moffett's (1989) inductive approach, I integrated students' personal stories and peers' experiences. The students' commentary-based discussions on topics like racism, gender, and morality became more insightful and engaging. Often, the dialogue was so animated that I scarcely had a chance to chime in. Here is an example of how our discussion, which branched out from our commentary writing, tackled the topic of racism based on Richard Wright's *Black Boy.*

Discussing Racism After Reading Wright's Memoir

Inspired by the profound impact of commentary writing, I wanted my students to tackle more complex and sensitive issues. We chose *Black Boy* by Richard Wright to explore themes of racism and identity. During our discussion on *Black Boy*, my high-achieving middle schoolers tackled the sensitive topic of racism, typically avoided by my Asian American students (Lee and Dijkgraaf 2022). David (pseudonym) shared in his commentary that he related to Wright's refusal to give a pre-determined graduation speech, recalling an incident at his school. In the memoir, Wright's principal cautioned against speaking freely in front of Whites (Wright 1966). David recounted a similar experience: his White teacher preferred a White student as the mock trial group's speaker, implying Asians were too quiet for leadership roles.

When I heard about David's experience, my eyes widened. I felt my blood pressure rise. Then, one of my students responded to David by saying, "Yeah, that's why we should read more books to be knowledgeable of others so we can deal with racism wisely." Hearing this student's response made me feel ashamed because my response would only stir up more hatred toward that teacher. I was relieved to hear that student's pensive comment. After that, another student said, "We still have racism going on because we stay passive not because we don't understand others." Another student asked, "So, how would you stop racism?" Then, the discussion about racism continued.

The students brought up what they knew about the Black Lives Matter movement, George Floyd, the Georgia shooting incident that killed eight people, six of whom were Asians, and anti-Asian attacks since the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the students expressed their opinions about how Asian people should not support the Black Lives Matter movement because many Asian people are attacked by Black people, while other students said we should support all kinds of movements that involve anti-racism. I wanted to make our discussions more directly related to the chapters in *Black Boy*, but I did not want to interrupt their conversation.

Listening to my students discuss racism, I conceptualized a brief writing task. I wanted them to articulate in writing the racial hierarchies depicted in *Black Boy* and examine how social media, news, and pop culture shape our views on different

cultures, ethnicities, and races. Furthermore, I inquired how such influences might impact our self-perception of racial/ethnic and cultural identity. I instructed them to initially share their thoughts via Google Classroom commentaries and then draft an outline addressing these racism-related topics.

In support of Moffett's (1988) transpersonal writing, I wanted to help my students learn to express ideas of "universal value in a personal voice" (170-171). I told them that, in addition to using the books, they could include their personal experiences or those of others to support their claims. My students were so surprised that I let them write their papers using first-person pronouns, and I was surprised to hear my students' voices in the hallway. I expected them to talk about video games, but they were still conversing about *Black Boy* and racism. Smiling, I called out to them in the hallway: "Don't forget to submit your essay outlines next week!"

Becoming a Writer

Through the process of writing commentary, my students found genuine joy in writing, which naturally boosted their confidence as writers. This transformation not only improved their writing skills but also created a more dynamic and collaborative classroom environment. "Commentarying" transformed many of my students' apprehensions about writing. They began to understand writing as a social, interactive practice. Through these exercises, they expanded their viewpoints and learned to articulate them, either collaboratively or independently. This process made them confident writers, shifting their view from dread to see it as a vital social activity. Heath (2009) posits that learning is rooted in socialization, while Nieto (2009) emphasizes the role of social context in education. Moffett (1987) suggests that successful learning connects with the broader "social world," fostering diverse ideas and choices (97, 119).

I agree with Hairston's (1982) argument that both skilled and unskilled writers must discover how to write by developing their topics intuitively, not methodically. Commentary writing provides students with a partial notion of what they want to write about, and they develop more profound ideas by dialoguing with their peers. As Murray (1976) emphasizes, we should teach writing as a process because we are not teaching a product.

Commentary writing enhanced my teaching approach, focusing on constructive feedback rather than unproductive criticism. Through discussions on racism derived from their commentaries, my students demonstrated an understanding that literature conveys cultural norms and attitudes (Rosenblatt 2005). They now walk into class resembling *Winnie-the-Pooh*'s Tigger, full of energy and enthusiasm. During these conversations, they respected their peers and engaged in collaborative learning, recognizing and appreciating their writing abilities. Now, anticipating my students' writing feels like awaiting postcards from friends.

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(Why) Haven't We Figured It Out by Now? Cultivating Joyful Teaching and Learning in ELA

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You took my joy, I want it back.
–Lucinda Williams, "Joy"

We've got no time for crying/We've got work to do. –Mavis Staples "We've Got Work to Do"

Despite our years of learning and teaching, our dedication to students, and our commitment to professional growth, there are still disagreements on how to define literacy, much less how to teach it. We could talk about multiple and conflicting literacy theories, and how each has priorities according to their research, goals, and subjectivities. Some contend that literacy is a social practice, multimodal, and embodied. Other educators want to keep literacy more narrowly defined to reading, writing, language, listening, and speaking skills. Old discussions regarding the efficacy of balanced literacy versus the science of reading have arisen again. The newest issue is the place of artificial intelligence (AI) in literacy learning, but since we don't know yet what AI will be, or even what it is right now, it's impossible to figure out what impact it will have.

We are increasingly aware of how economic, social, and political forces impact our schools, students, and ourselves. #Metoo, Black Lives Matter, and COVID revealed historical flaws in American institutions and thinking. Our awareness of and attendance to the myriad factors that impact our students' learning and well-being has grown, and yet many literacy curricula are homogenized even as our student population is increasingly diverse. Powerful forces are at work to limit students' access to contributions from culturally and sexually diverse authors through book bans and changes in state and district policies about what can and cannot be taught. Does this make literacy teaching an amorphous endeavor, subject only to the whims of politics, culture, and digital technology? It may seem like that to wary educators who have years of experience with curricula foisted on them by politically and financially motivated leaders. This creates confusion and disheartenment.

And yet there is, as always, hope. In her groundbreaking book *Unearthing Joy: A Guide to Culturally and Historically Responsive Teaching and Learning,* Gholdy Muhammad (2023) describes five pursuits in education, intentionally using the word "pursuit" to move beyond the limitations and endpoints of standards or goals (17). These pursuits are identity, skills, intellect, criticality, and joy. They are nonlinear, iterative practices and are part of a humanizing education, and the basis of her culturally and historically responsive framework. There is joy for teachers and students in recognizing students as brilliant (Christensen 2009) or as geniuses (Muhammad 2023). Bettina Love (2019) notes that joy does not spring from some make-believe land of perfection, but from facing the realities of colonialism, sexism, racism, poverty, and homophobia head on: "While we do not forget injustice, we are focused instead on love, well-being, and joy and refuse to be oppressed any longer" (12).

Joy and Absence

Maybe we will never figure out how to teach literacy in ways that are effective for all students, and maybe it's not even an appropriate or reasonable goal. Poet and conflict mediator Pádraig Ó Tuama (2021) asks us to undo some of our conditioned ideas and internalized rules about what it means to teach and learn. Instead of rules, there are stories. Our students' stories about who they are as literate beings blend and/or conflict with the stories projected onto them by families, teachers, friends, and governments. These stories can foreclose possibilities instead of creating openings. To address this, Ó Tuama notes that absence can be as important as presence. We need containers and we need vastness. These are not binaries but contain both/and: a deep focus on the interconnectedness within and amongst our inner selves, communities, and nature. There are spaces in between our heartbeats and in authentic dialogue, where listening is as necessary as talking. The spaces or absences create rhythm and energy. The same goes for teaching. To create, learn, and/or practice something new or challenging, time, practice, and failure are necessary. Ó Tuama (2021) offers the questions: "How does it fail? Does it fail well?" For teachers, this may evolve into panic: If we don't teach X now, the students won't know it for the test/won't be ready for the next unit/WILL NEVER LEARN TO READ (WELL). We have been taught that our job is to fix the flaws or address the learning gaps in and for our students, whether those came from families, friends, trauma, culture, or last year's teacher. Discomfort with failure means we don't get to celebrate growth and progress, only lament imperfection. Teaching and learning require risk-taking. There is joy in these risks. Fear of disapproval, of being wrong, robs us of joy. What if we celebrated our students' and our failures? Maybe one reason we haven't figured out literacy teaching is because of our fear of failure.

The lack of comfort with absence and failure is deeply embedded in the perception of not-enough-time. In the neoliberal capitalist economy of today's United States, we are all concerned with the value of time. Numerous self-help gurus offer us opportunities to save time, maximize time, time-share, mark time, find time, control time. We are to avoid wasting time or losing time, all in the name of productivity. What happens, though, if we step back and away, or pull ourselves out of this peculiar and particular perspective? What if we question and reclaim how time works? Perhaps the push to be present (to be perfect) is the opposite of what is needed. What would change if we saw literacy as a repertoire instead of a tool, as something containing both absence and presence, as something "...hard to see and describe and take the measure of, and also what's immeasurable, irreducible, non-quantifiable, limitless and expansive" (Restler 2023, 3)?

Joy and Art

According to architect Frank Lloyd Wright, symmetry is created through the relationship between repose and motion (Shoaff 2020). In music, the spaces between notes/strums/beats are necessary to create rhythm. This is also true of poetry. Ó Tuama suggests that time is a character in any poem or story and shows up in the blank spaces in poems: caesura, spacing between letters and words, silence. Skilled writers vary sentence structure to keep reader attention through presence and absence. There's more than just telling a story or relating facts. Sentences and words have rhythm and energy in and of themselves. Of knowing what to expect, but also having some surprises along the way. This is true of teaching as well.

We are all embedded in this culture, but that does not mean we have to accept it on its own terms. Muhammad writes, "Joy encompasses happiness/smiles, truth, beauty, aesthetics, art, wonder, personal fulfillment, and solutions to the social problems of the world" (70). Maybe it is enough to keep our eyes open and minds curious about what seems to be working in our specific communities and classrooms. But we must also be alert to how science evolves within the constraints of our communal intelligence, culture, and values. This allows us to see the unfolding drama of symmetry, gravity, time, and motion Lloyd Wright spoke of: "It is the resonance between our inner laws and the laws governing the greater universe that makes art a pathway to deep and meaningful experience" (Shoaff iv). Perhaps this is the way to restore, reclaim, and reinvigorate joy in our teaching. Mysteries of the world exist alongside observational data, and curiosity draws open new vistas of thought, wonder, and experience.

Awareness of Joy

Lama Rod Owens (2023) writes, "Joy is an expression of our natural mind and is felt as fluidity and potential. It is the experience of realizing that there are always alternatives, always different paths to take" (102). It is our responsibility to find, create, and cultivate joy for ourselves and for our students. For Ross Gay (2019), the practice of writing about delight builds up the muscle of recognizing joy, and then noticing the feeling that comes with it. It's not a trivial thing, this paying attention to joy and its attending thoughts and emotions. Perhaps that is our work. It's motivating, nourishing, and brings about ease, appreciation, and gratitude. It's also about sustainability and stamina, and the necessity of yin and yang, rest and play, presence and absence.

Perhaps the reason that joy is elusive in school is because school was not built for joy. It was built for diligence, competition, either/or thinking, and individualism. Despite that, we literacy educators have chosen to remain in schools and share the joys we find there. There are no universal ways of teaching and learning, but there are ways to make these practices more joyful: Seeing the brilliance of our students. Working for a more just world. Getting comfortable with the discomfort that comes with risk-taking. Finding and celebrating absence as well as presence. Tuning in to our "inner laws and the laws that govern the greater universe." If we see those universal laws as based in love, then joy is a practice and pursuit of human flourishing.

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Finding a Balance: Navigating High-Stakes Testing and Standardized Curricula for Joyful Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

In recent decades, education legislation and policies at the federal, state, and district levels have significantly impacted urban public schools in the United States. These policies prioritize high-stakes testing and the implementation of scripted and standardized curricula (Cataldo 2021). Consequently, they have had a disruptive effect on the potential for culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students to engage in joyful teaching and learning experiences (Muhammad 2023).

Legislators and policymakers' fixation upon high-stakes testing is one of the reasons why K-12 urban teachers continue to face the challenge of creating learning environments that provide diverse students with the opportunity to "understand themselves and the power structures that influence their worlds and how these structures operate to stifle or obfuscate young people's purpose" (Emdin 2021, ix).

In this essay, we, two early career urban English Language Arts (ELA) educators from northern New Jersey, share our thoughts on how we navigated the pressure of high-stakes tests and standardized curricula while providing our students with joyful teaching and learning experiences rooted in culturally and historically responsive pedagogy.

What Is Joyful Teaching and Learning?

Reflecting on our teaching experiences, we have learned that joyful teaching can look different across classrooms and teachers, as teachers bring different lived experiences to the classroom that are influenced by our complex and intersecting identities. For us, joyful teaching and learning is:

> To achieve a state of consciousness that allows one to operate in the world having mind, body, and spirit activated, validated, and whole without distortion or concession as one acquires all essential knowledge—academic knowledge, knowledge of self, knowledge of how to navigate one's immediate surroundings, knowledge of systems in which one is embedded (particularly those that are structured to disempower), and knowledge of the world (Emdin 2021, 1).

In other words, joyful teaching and learning captures a variety of emotions, ideas, and situations. It ranges from the excitement of inspiring students, seeing them grow as individuals and academics, and the incidental learning that can only exist within a school building. Joyful teaching and learning are nuanced and complex, especially in the face of systematic challenges.

American Educational Reforms Disrupt Joyful Teaching and Learning

In the 1990s and 2000s, American educational reforms focused on three main aspects: standards-based reform, standardized testing, and teacher accountability. These components were heavily debated among federal and state politicians, lobbyists, and education policymakers. The push for increased accountability stemmed from the belief that all students can achieve at higher levels and that schools must be held accountable for student learning and achievement (Cross, 2014). In fact, between the early 1990s and early 2000s, particularly during the presidencies of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, "education reformers were convinced that if states, with federal assistance, helped establish academic standards and then held schools accountable for having their students meet standards, educational performance would improve" (Cross, 2014).

This belief resulted in the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. The main aim of the standards-based reform was to guarantee that every student was making progress and that teachers were being held accountable for student achievement. Since the 1990s, classroom instruction has become closely aligned with state teaching standards and standardized tests. Still today, the debate over standards-based reform and standardized testing in American public education continues, especially with educational scholars and researchers advocating for the use of culturally and historically responsive curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning (Muhammad 2023).

Debates on what should be taught in public schools lead to a narrow focus on standardized testing and promote a "one-size fits all" approach to curriculum. What this means is "curriculum and instruction today are still mostly, if not only, skills-driven, absent of cultural and historical responsiveness" (Muhammad 2023, 51). As a result, the needs and interests of culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students do not often get met, which can lead to disengagement and hinder students' ability to experience joyful teaching and learning experiences.

New Jersey ELA educators and students are bound by the New Jersey Student Learning Standards for English Language Arts (NJSLS-ELA). Educators must find a balance between adhering to legislation and policies, and providing culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students with an education that values their identities, abilities, and potential and empowers them to succeed in a fast-changing world.

Finding a Balance

Without joyful teaching and learning, being a teacher will boil down to "the status of specialized technicians within the school bureaucracy, whose function then becomes one of managing and implementing curricular programs rather than developing or critically appropriating curricula to fit specific pedagogical concerns" (Giroux 1988, 122).

Simply put, the teaching profession can easily turn into a career that focuses on routines (i.e., teaching scripted curricula) rather than mutual empowerment, critical thinking, and, most notably, the sharing and creation of new knowledge between teachers, their colleagues, and students. Because of this, it is crucial to find a balance between education legislation and policies at the federal, state, and district levels, while also promoting and sustaining joyful teaching and learning.

In our experiences as urban ELA teachers, we have learned that balancing teaching standards geared towards standardized testing and joyful teaching

requires a thorough understanding of NJSLS-ELA standards for the grade level you teach. The standards provide clear, detailed expectations for what all students should know and be able to do at the end of a grade level, serving as the foundation for designing curriculum, aligning assessment and accountability, and ensuring readiness for college, career, and life.

The NJSLS-ELA standards are "non-negotiable," and can feel like a barrier between educators and joyful experiences in education; however, we find that the more familiar a teacher is with the standards, the greater ability they have to teach them in a joyful way. In other words, to teach the concepts in a joyful way, instead of teaching to the test, educators must understand the expectation placed upon them. They cannot begin to spark joy if this is not understood; being forewarned is to be forearmed.

Once we understood our standards, we were able to provide our students with joyful teaching and learning experiences rooted in culturally and historically responsive pedagogy. That is, we began incorporating culturally relevant texts (CRTs) into our lessons that portray diverse cultures, ethnicities, races, religions, and perspectives and authentically discuss social and racial injustices. We found that incorporating CRTs into our classroom allowed for more moments of joyful teaching and learning since they enabled students to broaden their understanding and gain insights into diverse cultures, perspectives, and experiences beyond their own.

In addition to including CRTs, we expanded our definition of literature to be more inclusive of students' prior knowledge and interests. For example, analyzing text structure can be taught utilizing the lyrics of a popular song. Playing the song and analyzing the structure of it meets the state set standards, engages the students, and allows joy to enter the learning space. Once students are hooked and understand songs have structures similar to poems, classes can analyze other text structures using CRTs. By understanding the standards fully, teachers can better integrate joy into their lessons and create authentic, joyful learning moments in their classroom community.

Conclusion

Teaching can feel prescribed and mundane when there is an absence of joy in the classroom. The most important way to find joy in teaching and learning is understanding the policies that are being placed upon states, districts, and individual schools. By gaining knowledge of the expectations and standards schools must teach, teachers can then better meet the needs of their culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students and provide them with learning experiences that are joyful and rooted in culturally and historically responsive best practices.

Reflection Questions for Teachers

1. What are your thoughts on the current state of American education reform?
2. Do you think that throughout history, American education reformers have ever considered prioritizing joyful teaching and learning experiences in classrooms when creating and enacting legislation and policies at the federal, state, and local levels?
3. Your experiences are invaluable. How do high-stakes testing and standardized curricula impact your pedagogical approaches and learning experiences that you provide your students?
4. How have you maintained a sense of joy and creativity in teaching while navigating high-stakes testing and standardized curricula in your classroom?
5. How can you adapt your teaching practices to address students' individual needs while still working within the

framework of standardized curricula and testing requirements?

6. Can you share an example of successful teaching methods or pedagogical approaches that you have implemented that integrate joy into the learning process while aligning with standardized curricula?

7. How do you engage with other educators or seek professional development opportunities to navigate the challenges of high-stakes testing and standardized curricula while promoting joyful teaching and learning?

8. How do you maintain your passion for teaching and learning in the face of external pressures related to high-stakes testing and standardized curricula?

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

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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 onamission
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 Saundra." 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 Yourselves" (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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Facilitating Joy in the Literacy Classroom by Recognizing Preferences of Core Personality Styles

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Joy is the centerpiece at the table of learning. In literacy classrooms, however, we often welcome students to a banquet of texts without adequately assessing their tastes and curating our menus to their palates. It's no wonder. We are pressed forward, making our best efforts to fill the deep gaps of students' skill deficits in a post-COVID world, as we work to meet district benchmarks, prepare for standardized testing, cover curricula, overcome impossible student to teacher ratios, and so much more.

On the other hand, there are more ingredients available to teachers than ever before as we form the recipe for our students' success. The master teacher, as the master chef, knows which are the most potent. There is a way to approach the reading environment that will not cause an educator to collapse under the demands of today's classroom. We can accelerate skill development by inviting students to linger at our tables for long enough to savor new tastes—and to facilitate this, we must prioritize joy.

It is not a shocking assertion that when students enjoy reading, skill gains become more rapidly achieved. According to the article, "How to Speed Read for Increased Comprehension," published by Iris Reading, LLC, a pioneer in speed reading and memory training for Fortune 500 companies, NASA, and multiple prestigious universities, "Passion and enthusiasm draw our attention and motivate us to concentrate and absorb more of what we read, helping us to read faster and remember more information." However, educators do not often pause to recognize the power of this factor. An extensive study conducted by Jihyun Lee (2014) examined reading patterns in students from five Eastern countries with the highest reading performance (China, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan), five Western countries with the highest reading performance (Finland, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the Netherlands), and three other influential nations in the world (the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom). The core of this research centered on discovering similarities in these 13 differing nations and cultures that would be the greatest predictors of students having strong reading skills. The study concluded that the principal components of human learning do not vary across nations, regardless of their vastly different education, culture, and language systems. In every region and country, the primary indicator of reading achievement was how much students enjoy reading. Lee claims that, "institutional and resource variables are not the secret ingredients of high academic performance of students" since school funding, availability of instructional aids, starting age of education, number of hours in school, ability grouping, etc. provided less of a guarantee for strong reading skills than whether students found pleasure in reading. This correlation between joy and reading success builds a foundational claim that students' reading enjoyment ought to be one of the essential goals held by any teacher of reading.

Personality labeling systems such as Myers-Briggs and Don Lowry's "True Colors" are some of the most helpful tools

that educators can harness as they seek to increase students' joy. When teachers recognize how personality styles typically coincide with reading preferences, they can more readily guide students to overcome individual struggles and frustrations. Instructors can encourage students to experiment with new strategies and gain an acceptance of differences between themselves and other readers, ultimately increasing reading enjoyment and volume.

While teaching eighth-grade English over the past 16 years, differentiating for the needs of all types of readers has been a major concern for me as a practitioner. Having applied "True Colors" and Myers-Briggs to my classroom via four years of student surveys and interviews, with over 400 students studied, I have gained insights regarding students greatest likes and dislikes that have enabled me to infuse ever-increasing joy into my students' reading process—first by making the reading environment tailored to more personality types (with an especially significant emphasis on the needs of struggling readers) and also by increasing my knowledge of texts that match different personality styles' reading preferences.

In implementing differentiation via personality styles, the satisfaction I have found in the effort of learning has grown alongside of my students' joy. The gains were evident in the 2023-2024 school year as 58 percent of my students read at least 2,000 pages, nearly 80 percent improved over a year's worth of proficiency according to district standardized benchmarks, and nearly all of my students indicated that they enjoyed reading more by June than they had in September on the end of year survey. My students are comprised of a wide variety of demographics, including individuals with IEPs and basic skills challenges. The top three page-leaders (two of whom have 504 plans) from my on-grade-level classes read 13,115 pages, 7,786 pages, and 7,771 pages each. One boy, who learned to delight in reading once he found the types of books he loved, conquered 5,243 pages even though he was placed in an Orton Gillingham resource class as a dyslexic, resistant reader in the previous year.

I have one 45-minute period a day with these students, their sole source of reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling instruction. Nevertheless, I carve out 10 minutes of silent independent reading time in three class periods a week, usually at the start of class on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I allow students to read any books they choose (beyond the curriculum of academic classes), and they are permitted to abandon books at any point in time, since having zero commitment to texts increases their receptivity towards new styles. At the start of the year, there is a learning curve for students while searching for titles that are most likely to match their tastes. I offer assistance each time a student nears the end of a book with the goal of always having a next choice lined up to prevent gaps in reading, but I strive to let the choice be the student's own. Autonomy is of vast importance if individuals are to ultimately become readers beyond the school day. When a student struggles to find a match, one useful technique is to present a pile of three to five books that fit the parameters commonly desired by that individual's personality style. Since I survey students at the start of the year, I enter independent reading conferences with some knowledge and can usually make several good recommendations. However, if finding a book that suits a student's preferences continues to be difficult, another strategy is to let that student sample genres through shorter texts. Furthermore, adjusting reading levels to find an appropriate challenge can be helpful. Especially for reluctant readers,

easing up on difficulty in self-selected reading may increase accessibility so that conflicts or characters can be appreciated in a way that the rigor of texts in the language arts curriculum may not allow. By the end of the school year, 30 minutes of choice reading a week along with reading in assigned texts does not add up to several thousand pages. Yet, providing students with frequent encounters with books they enjoy will often lead them to read extra on their own time, especially as they reach climaxes of plots they find intriguing.

Another aspect that has increased students' joy regarding choice reading is to make the assessments low-stakes. At the start of every week, a clipboard which I call the "Status of the Class" circulates the room so that students can provide me with their current book titles, page numbers, and favorite vocabulary words from that week's reading. To make this procedure less wearisome, I give a simple reward to a student in each class who furnishes an impressive word. The terms students supply on the "Status of the Class" are also the source for our biweekly vocabulary list, giving students some influence over the words they will be required to study. Throughout the week, I check in with all students individually or in small groups, having a quick conversation with each of them about their books or reading strategies. These reading conferences go a long way towards forging connections that show my pupils that the effort they put into reading is meaningful to me. Towards the end of each week, I ask students to write in their journal regarding their independent book, always allowing students the option to write a free reaction to their book while also providing multiple prompts in case a sentence starter or question is needed. Journal notebooks are graded once a month with independent reading responses comprising one section of the rubric. Since all other independent reading assessments fall into the class participation category, students have many opportunities to do well with this style of reading without necessitating many formal evaluations. In this way and many others, teaching with personality in mind has accelerated students' growth without requiring extra time and preparation from me as a professional. With so many aspects of our pedagogy that meet with conflict in the day-to-day operations of the classroom, how much more important is it that we embrace methods such as these to increase our joy?

Even though the four categories of "True Colors" and the 16 categories of Myers-Briggs are far too basic to capture the essence of any person with full accuracy, both systems are a simplification that can aid individuals as they strive to understand general types of temperaments, values, motivations, capabilities, etc. As tools used by teachers to deepen their understanding of individual students, viewing the classroom through the lens of personality labels can save time as well as help educators gain greater depth in connecting with the classroom community. Furthermore, when it comes to links between reading preferences and personality types, a myriad of essential applications opens.

One point I do need to qualify is that, overall, the most worrying aspect of my personal research in this field is that there is so little pre-existing data to examine. For this reason, I have used my own students as resources. I did not find any other teacher research published regarding this topic. There is a need for practitioners' studies and statistics to further explore the impact that differentiating based on personality styles can have on reading instruction.

At the onset, my goal was to explore how personality styles could potentially uncover patterns in reading preferences. I was searching for a shortcut to make

conferences with students regarding reading choices more productive and likely to help them find books they would love. I had noticed that students' reading rates increased when they worked through texts they enjoyed. If I could increase the total number of books students read and liked, I could increase their total pages read, and accelerate their reading growth. After half a decade of analysis, disaggregating data from over 25 classes of middle school readers, along with interviewing dozens of humanities teachers, I have gained much more insight than originally anticipated.

Sensory Perceivers (Orange) ● Thrive with movement in reading environment ● Sufficient "white noise" facilitates concentration ● Appreciate alternate structures and spontaneity ● Prefer direct, action-based plots that begin with conflict and have humor or characters in danger ● Benefit from explicit instruction in preferences and autonomy over reading environment ● Measure success by enjoyment	Sensory Judgers (Gold) ● Thrive with goals for self-improvement or a purpose for reading given by instructor ● Appreciate clearly defined structure in reading environment and text organization ● Prefer action-based plots, short expositions, realistic conflicts/characters ● Measure success by completion
Intuitive Thinkers (Green) ● Thrive with independence and intellectual freedom ● Read to think or learn ● Perceive reading as a process for gaining meaning and knowledge ● Appreciate non-fiction, sardonic tone, fantasy, sci-fi, texts that challenge ● Dislike waiting for classmates and discussions ● Opinionated, logical, curious, question authority	Intuitive Feelers (Blue) ● Thrive with connection to characters and classmates ● Adaptable to various environments ● Appreciate character development and likeable or relatable characters ● Read to "get lost," experience, relate

• Measure success by competency	• Measure success by how feelings were impacted

The simplest way to present findings is to detail the main features that students in each of the four core personality types have in common. These categories include: sensory perceivers (Myers-Briggs) also known as the "orange" personality type ("True Colors"), sensory judgers also known as the "gold" personality type, intuitive thinkers also known as the "green" personality type, and intuitive feelers also known as the "blue" personality type. The descriptions listed in each quadrant of the table above are how I have witnessed each of the personality types reflected in reading styles as I compared hundreds of student and educator testimonies over the past five years. All of these personalities have strengths, weaknesses, and preferences in the literacy classroom. Every student can benefit from teachers gaining knowledge of their personality patterns. However, data within my classroom studies as well as professional research cause one type to stand out as the group of students most likely to need teacher support to increase their joy in reading and ultimately their success as readers. In *True Colors: The Personality of Education*, Susan Kruger Winter asserts that only three percent of teachers in the U.S. identify as the "orange" personality type even though this temperament makes up 35 percent of the general population. As a result, few of these students will ever have a reading teacher model for them how a successful individual with this temperament approaches a text, unless educators take the initiative to learn about the specific needs of sensory perceivers.

Although findings regarding every personality type currently inform my instruction, my concerns for sensory perceivers were an impetus for how in-depth my investigation of the topic of personality styles and reading needs became. My first formal set of research ran from September 2020 until June 2021 with a general survey of 111 eighth grade students via Google Forms regarding reading preferences and temperament. Standardized testing data was matched with student responses from the survey to add in the context of skill levels. After this, 30 students and eight adult readers were interviewed in small groups or individually for further information collection. Finally, all findings were interpreted and analyzed by five veteran literacy teachers actively working in the New Jersey public school system for increased objectivity. In this study, I gathered data from 40 students who self-identified as "orange." Seventeen of these students claimed to hate reading. Twelve of them reported that they dislike it. In total, 72 percent of my students in the sensory perceiver personality type during that school year had strongly negative feelings towards reading. Furthermore, this group claimed to read for fun or non-essential learning with the least frequency. Also, according to reading benchmarks, the greatest percentage of lower performing readers was comprised of individuals who identified as this personality type.

Since this starting point, I have continued to compile evidence through the same surveys and interview questions for the past three years. Data collected at the start of the year maintain similar percentages of students in the "orange" personality type who do not find reading enjoyable. With four years of data compiled from approximately 400 students, patterns have emerged. The primary determining factors that separate high-achieving sensory

perceivers from those with lower proficiency rates are self-awareness and perceived autonomy in manipulating the reading environment to suit the individual's needs for movement, brain breaks, and sufficient noise/quiet. Typically, students with this personality style note that the proper reading environment is more important to their success than whether they appreciate the text being read, although they do have significant patterns in book preferences. In fact, nearly all sensory perceivers claim that movement while reading is helpful to them and more than half state that they have more success in comprehension while reading aloud with others or listening to the text while reading.

One "orange" who elects to read more frequently than many of his personality group peers and scores well on standardized testing echoed the sentiment of a large percentage of his fellow sensory perceivers when he explained that he likes reading at home better than in school because his reading style causes him stress in class. He is so focused on keeping his behavior in line to avoid upsetting the teacher and fellow students that he reads less efficiently. In a small-group interview during 2021, he stated that at home, "I usually sit in a rocking chair. Having the freedom to move without getting in trouble for disrupting others helps me focus." This boy, like many other students who identify as the same personality type, suggested that figuring out the optimal environment to facilitate movement that enables him to focus is a key factor in reading comprehension and enjoyment. In class, this student would sometimes struggle to efficiently move through pages during individual reading time. However, once we opened a dialogue about his needs within the reading environment and he realized his ability to modify his own surroundings, he learned ways to increase his focus, comprehension, and enjoyment of in-class reading time. He found that sitting alone on my heater (shaped like a bench and therefore providing more freedom to change positions than a desk) with earbuds in (for white noise, not music) helped. Unfortunately, most sensory perceivers note that the setting in which they read during the school day is somehow too stimulating (others talking or making noise) while also not being stimulating enough (no movement permitted). This, they say, directly reduces their ability to become lost in a text and hinders continued concentration on reading.

Additionally, individuals with the sensory perceiver personality also experience a great deal of consensus regarding books that fit their preferences. Though these readers often mention the genres of humor and horror as enjoyable, their tastes center more on fast-paced plots. According to nearly all 160 sensory perceivers surveyed over the past five years the most important factor for them in a text is for it to entertain. Therefore, nearly all sensory perceivers assert that finding a text that begins with tension or events that grip them as readers is essential. In terms of structure, they are more likely than other personalities to appreciate the alternative forms of plots found in graphic novels, short stories, comics, manga, online writing forums, etc.

Genres that sensory perceivers often dislike include romance, historical fiction, and any texts with exposition requiring a commitment to connect with characters before moving forward. One girl with mid-achieving proficiency who identifies as an "orange" personality type defined for me the texts she dislikes as, "Anything that does not give creative freedom to wonder what is next." She connects with most sensory perceivers' desire for excitement about surprises found in an unpredictable and intense conflict. Likewise, the majority of

students in this personality type claim to dislike all genres of non-fiction except for memoirs with dramatic survival stories. Similarly, sports-based texts are often a source of frustration because many sensory perceivers enjoy athletics, but many books that have sports as a key topic are character-based, not action-based—to make matters worse, those plots are often predictable and have low-stakes problems. Although some sensory judgers and intuitive feelers may gravitate towards those texts, students who identify as "orange" would not be likely to do so.

In literacy classrooms, educators can address the values of all personality styles in the learning environment as well as through the availability of text preferences without putting forth an overwhelming amount of effort. Starting the school year with surveys to learn about students is a common practice for most teachers. After an educator learns how to recognize the patterns of students' preferences via personality types, many timesaving applications emerge. For instance, in this past September's survey, a girl wrote, "For the personality test I got orange. While I was reading the personality traits, a lot of them seemed to describe me. I am curious… I am kinesthetic… I don't like only having a few options. I like a wide variety… I don't like to read anything that has too many words on one page. The reason behind that is because I get distracted a lot." Once I read this, I knew that I needed to ask her follow-up questions about her current strategies for movement while focusing on a text, if she has unintentionally been in trouble in other classroom reading environments, whether she rewards herself with brain breaks after a set time of reading, and what types of conflicts captivate her. This student, who had struggled to move beyond pretending to read and trying to remain out of trouble in previous years' English classes, was fairly easy to instruct regarding how to modify her own environment by setting a timer for breaks and transitioning to a corner space where movement without distracting others was possible. She also frequently chose to read aloud with a well-focused partner who identified as an intuitive feeler. In June, this same reader presented me with survey feedback commonly reported by her personality type as she wrote, "From September to now, I feel like I have read a whole lot more than previous years. Last year, I would barely read books and skim through pages just to get it over with. Now, I've taken my time reading. And now I read in and even outside the classroom! The me of September would never have thought I would read 2,517 pages in a span of 10 months. And I 100% know that I am a better reader because of that improvement. I feel I have better understanding of what books would keep me reading and which books I will not enjoy." Once the needs of sensory perceivers like this student are addressed, educators can help sensory judgers to work towards goals of self-improvement, can support intuitive thinkers in their efforts to find texts that will challenge them intellectually, and can guide intuitive feelers towards characters with whom they will experience inspiration and connection.

Although students' temperaments will shift over time as their identities change and mature, raising awareness of personality types teaches pupils how to address reading challenges with introspection and resilience. Learning strategies that work for them as individuals fosters the belief that reading skills are enhanced through practice. Moreover, conversing with students about the strengths and weaknesses of the varying personality types enables them to perceive that there are many preferences of value, not one correct answer about who readers ought to be.

I have seen many struggling readers learn how they read most efficiently, learn how to fall in love with books' characters, conflicts, or settings. Through recognizing patterns of students' personality styles, educators can guide their pupils towards a joy that draws them to the lifelong feast of reading. The first step is to perceive our literacy classrooms as an irresistible banquet with a diversity of joy that is available to all types of learners. Truly, when our students sample the abundance of tastes before them, they will learn the enormity of their appetites and will finally crave reading's manifold flavors.

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Centering Joy in the Classroom: Authentic Pedagogy Through Mindfulness and Purpose

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Authenticity is the linchpin for creating meaningful, equitable, and joyful learning experiences. Genuine face-to-face interactions between teachers and students are crucial for our collective recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating a shift from computer screens to real-time interactions. As educators, we must intentionally model authentic engagement with our students and course content, thereby fostering joy in the learning experience. This paper explores how authentic pedagogy, grounded in mindfulness and purpose, can increase joy in the classroom and enhance the sustainability of the teaching profession. It targets secondary and post-secondary educators, pre-service teachers, and teacher education programs, emphasizing that key literacy skills are fundamental to a free and civil society.[1] Such skills, while essential, need not come at the expense of joy. Fortunately, as demonstrated by educators like Linda Christensen, Zaretta Hammond, and Gholdy Muhammad, it is possible to experience such joy without sacrificing rigor.[2]

The link connecting authenticity and joy can be found in authenticity's transformative power to create meaningful, genuine connections between educators and learners. In the educational context, authenticity involves being true to oneself and transparent about pedagogy, while meaningfully connecting with students to create a safe, inclusive, and enriching learning environment. In such an environment, trust, positivity, and curiosity thrive. Authentic teachers can then use this positive momentum to overcome barriers impeding communication and understanding in the student/teacher relationship, thus setting the stage for creative risk-taking and productive struggle within the classroom (Christensen 1). We do so by modeling purpose and mindfulness for students daily. Essentially, when students are uninhibited by the fear of failure, they are open to experiencing joy. This joy leads them down a path toward lifelong learning, and that lifelong learning benefits us all.

Finding Purpose

By seeking an authentic purpose in learning, we establish the groundwork for a more joyful classroom. The social psychologist Michael Argyle demonstrates a clear correlation between purpose—our reasons for waking up each morning and

[1] Over the course of my fourteen-year career in education, I have had the privilege of working with students from middle school to postgraduate levels. My journey began teaching upper-level English courses at a suburban high school. Subsequently, I transitioned to a low-SES K-8 school, where I taught reading and language arts to skill-banded 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. For the past eight years, I have been dedicated to higher education, currently overseeing an educator licensure program at a state university and teaching theory and methods courses to practicing and pre-service teachers. These diverse teaching experiences have reinforced my belief that joy is a crucial element of any effective learning environment. This essay is thus written with the intention of addressing the varied needs and perspectives of a broad audience of educators.

[2] The definition of "rigor" in education has been debated for decades. See Tony Wagner's opinion piece in *Education Week* for a thoughtful description of how school leaders have asked the question, "What is rigor?" since the early twenty-first century.

engaging in daily activities—and the amount of satisfaction and happiness we feel or experience (157). When infusing the classroom with joy, this means both the teacher and the students need to see a purpose for their learning (*Unearthing* 16). Gholdy Muhammad offers five pursuits as a means of focusing classroom purpose in a just and equitable way. These pursuits show us that the development of skills can be greatly augmented by identity development, including ways to help students view themselves as intellectuals and their world with criticality. This informs my purpose as an educator, which is to empower students and help them navigate a complex, technology-saturated world. I tell them I can do so by fostering curiosity and a sense of playfulness in the classroom. By the end of the semester, nearly all of them believe me.

One way that teachers can help students discover and maintain a sense of purpose is by asking students to set their own learning goals in the classroom. For example, in the "WOOP" model, students create "**w**ish statements," identify "**o**utcomes" and "**o**bstacles," and then make a "**p**lan" to "defeat" said obstacles (Oettingen; cited in Piccoli). This includes students as co-creators in the classroom and gives them a say in how they spend their time each day. In my classroom, this looks different depending on the age and developmental stage of my learners. For example, at the middle school level, I begin by presenting students with a menu of literacy skills connected to diverse personal and professional pursuits. We discuss the value and transferability of such skills in the broader world, then I ask students to reflect on their identities and interests beyond the classroom.[3] In small groups, they share these interests and brainstorm connections to one or more of the previewed literacy skills. With scaffolding and support, each student develops their own achievable learning goals, which subsequently become the focal point and primary purpose of their learning journey in my classroom.

To illustrate, I worked with a group of middle school students facing challenges in both academic confidence and essential literacy skills. In the initial weeks of the semester, I dedicated time to getting to know these students through a series of activities focused on fostering self-awareness, building a sense of community, and promoting reflection. These activities included interest surveys, free writes, "I Am" poems, small and whole group discussions, and brief presentations where students taught each other various skills and ideas. Throughout these activities, I encouraged students to draw on their strengths, urging them to identify their existing interests and talents. As I gained a deeper understanding of the individuals in my classroom, we shifted to a review of age-appropriate literacy skills. Together, we discussed how individual skills might be applied beyond the classroom setting. In a particularly impactful conversation, students identified various professions they were interested in, ranging from NBA players and rap artists to graphic novelists, doctors, missionaries, and teachers. While it was straightforward to link professions requiring a college education to the work in my ELA classroom, the connections to other pursuits required a bit more work to clarify.

Inquiring into the perspectives of my aspiring athletes, I sought authentic insights into the most crucial traits defining a successful basketball player. Student responses painted a diverse picture, highlighting attributes such as

[3] I define the concept of "transferability" for students using the text, *Understanding by Design*: "The ability to transfer our knowledge and skill effectively involves the capacity to take what we know and use it creatively, flexibly, fluently, in different settings or problems, on our own" (Wiggins and McTighe 40).

determination, talent, and grit, which laid the groundwork for introducing the concept of "productive struggle" (Hammond 12; see also Ritchhart, Means, and Knapp). Productive struggle acknowledges the positive learning outcomes that occur when students engage in challenging tasks. It also foregrounds confidence and resilience as integral components of "grit" (Sririam 1). With this foundation, I then asked students to identify and discuss recent challenges they had experienced. As might be expected, many of these challenges were academic in nature. Centered around the importance of persistence and resilience, I helped students draw connections between the dedication required for athletic excellence and the process of honing academic skills. These connections became particularly evident as students noted struggles with reading comprehension, writing stamina, and vocabulary acquisition. Focused on these necessary but elusive literacy skills, each student set 1-2 learning goals with various checkpoints throughout the semester. As learners progressed in their skills acquisition, I made it a point to celebrate their successes. And more importantly, during moments of struggle, we collectively acknowledged and honored the grit and persistence demonstrated and developed by students as they worked through challenges. While minimizing the fear of failure, this approach enabled me to effectively engage my middle school learners in the authentic pursuit of literacy skills, anchored to a greater purpose.

By way of further example, in my high school English classroom, I had a student named Derek who faced significant challenges with vocabulary acquisition.[4] Despite his struggles, Derek's dream was to become a professional athlete, specifically a football player. Understanding the importance of effective communication both on and off the field, Derek and I worked together to set meaningful goals using a modified version of the WOOP model. His **w**ish was to enhance his vocabulary to articulate his thoughts clearly during interviews and team discussions. Together, we identified the **o**utcome of being able to confidently use a diverse range of words, and the **o**bstacle of his limited vocabulary base. Derek's **p**lan involved incorporating daily reading of sports articles and using a vocabulary-building app on his phone. Over the semester, Derek's dedication and resilience grew palpable. He diligently practiced new words, integrating them into class discussions and written assignments. During a class presentation, where Derek eloquently analyzed a sports commentary article, his classmates and I celebrated his progress with a round of applause to which he bowed with flourish. We recognized not only his expanding vocabulary but also his unwavering grit. This recognition not only highlighted his expanding vocabulary but also his intrinsic joy and sense of fulfillment in mastering new skills. By connecting his academic endeavors to his athletic aspirations, we underscored the transferability of these skills, reinforcing his sense of purpose and joy in our ELA classroom.

Practicing Mindfulness

While purpose is crucial for fostering an authentic, productive, and joyful learning environment, mindfulness holds equal, if not greater, significance. When referring to mindfulness, I draw on three interrelated concepts: self-awareness, presence, and grace. A teacher's self-awareness directly informs their ability to create a safe and inclusive learning environment, as well as to engage in socially just and culturally

[4] All student names are pseudonyms.

responsive teaching (*Unearthing* 55, 85). An individual's situated perspective, or cultural frame of reference, informs the relationships we build, the pedagogical approaches we take, and the assumptions or biases we carry (Hammond 56-58; *Unearthing* 91-93). In my role as a university professor, I often work with pre-service teachers to reflect on and identify the cultural frames of reference they bring to the classroom. Such reflective work can be greatly supplemented by drawing on readings by researcher-educators such as Hammond, Muhammad, Danielle Lillge, and Ashley Boyd. Equipped with a robust theoretical framework for self-reflection, pre-service teachers can more effectively engage in activities focused on recognizing and uncovering implicit values and biases, which ultimately enables them to bring a more authentic self to the learning space.

Identity should be introduced as a nuanced and complicated combination of positionalities, and both students and pre-service teachers should be encouraged to recognize and investigate numerous elements of their identity to develop self-awareness. In addition to engaging in reflective free writes aimed at prompting individuals to identify and articulate meaningful experiences related to culture, religion, race, language, class, sexuality, and gender identity, pre-service teachers also benefit from being paired with peers whose identities differ from their own. This can be done while avoiding tokenism or the exploitation of minority identities by using identity markers that are not connected to race, ethnicity, religion, or sexuality. For instance, I have had students fill out interest and identity surveys at the beginning of the semester that include low-stakes identity markers such as their favorite music genre, ice cream flavor, or sports team. We then dig into the more loaded aspects of identity as the semester continues, beginning with the premise that no individual should ever be asked to serve as a representative of an entire demographic. Implemented as a type of academic buddy system, these diverse pairs then progress through coursework together, serving as study partners and participating in various relationship-building activities, including a Socratic podcast assignment in which they interview each other by asking a series of increasingly reflective and critical questions. Throughout this collaborative work, I encourage pre-service teachers to confront their biases and assumptions.[5] At the semester's end, each learner reflects on the process, identifying ways they have learned and grown. As a part of this, the pre-service teacher gains insight into their own situated perspective and makes meaningful connections to their future as an educator. While this focused social, emotional, and relational work can be adapted for younger students, meticulous preparation and thoughtful framing become even more crucial in this context. Beginning with a simple "I Am" discussion prompt that involves repeated rounds of sharing with a partner can help underscore the complexity of identity and lay the groundwork for celebrating pluralism in the classroom.[6]

[5] For ways to support mindfulness practices in a multicultural classroom, see David Rodgers.

[6] This type of activity can be used productively at any point in a semester or school year. Pair students and provide them with instructions. Ask students to answer the question, "Who am I?" by speaking continuously for one minute while their partner listens. At the end of the minute, switch roles and have the other person share. Repeat this process three or more times—depending on the age and maturity of students—with the prompt that participants cannot repeat information they have already shared. At the end, have students reflect on the diversity of their identities and experiences. Encourage them to consider how sharing and listening to their peers' stories fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of the multicultural dynamics within the

Presence is another key aspect of mindfulness, which can increase the levels of joy and fulfillment in learning. In my conversations with pre-service teachers about the significance of presence, I often refer to the work of the activist-educator and author Jerry Farber. In "Teaching and Presence," Farber addresses concerns about classroom management and explores what happens when we fully immerse ourselves in the current moment. The educator who is truly present can respond meaningfully to what takes place in real time. And by recognizing, acknowledging, and communicating with the myriad physical, emotional, and intellectual identities in the classroom, we can maximize the effectiveness and relevance of our instruction. All moments are teachable, and a teacher who is fully present makes every moment matter. This immersive approach extends beyond mere presence; it involves skillfully crafting authentic and purposeful interactions with students, thereby constructing a rich tapestry of engagement and mutual understanding. Conversely, we know a distracted or bored educator can lead to dissatisfactory outcomes, including making students feel alienated, unmotivated, or apathetic (Farber 216). Such apathy in turn stifles the pursuit of joy, diminishes the likelihood of creative risk-taking, and hinders profound, transferable learning experiences. Farber tells us that to be fully present is to remember that the classroom is

> a place where individual worlds, individual universes converge in real time and real space. Each person there is an absolute center, and yet, with respect to the classroom itself, each person is also an emissary: from a family, a set of locales, a set of social contexts, a long history of nights and days. (Farber 216)

Approaching the classroom as a profoundly pluralistic and intersectional nexus empowers us to build relationships with all students, to recognize the intricacies of identity, and to ground ourselves in the precise space and moment at hand. A spectrum of mindfulness practices, encompassing breathing techniques, in-class yoga, guided meditations, visualizations, and focused personal writings, collectively serve to align both our students and us within a shared learning space. Engaging in these practices fosters relationship building, while enhancing teacher uptake and the ability to respond meaningfully in real-time to the unfolding dynamics in the classroom.

Grace is the final element of mindfulness I use when fostering joyful learning. In this context, grace represents a cultivated form of civil goodwill, characterized by giving individuals the benefit of the doubt. Extending grace, both to oneself and to others, is indispensable for building robust positive relationships, persuading students to embrace productive struggle, and establishing an environment where all learners feel secure to experiment, explore, and take creative risks. This approach aligns with the shift towards strength-based pedagogy and has personally helped me avoid deficit thinking (Hammond 59).[7] Author and professor Sharon Shelton-Colangelo further articulates this concept of grace, when they assert, "In order to create joy in our classrooms [...] we must cultivate our own compassion and love, especially for those students who are most in need" (110).

classroom. This activity not only enhances students' self-awareness and communication skills but also promotes joy in discovering commonalities and differences, reinforcing a sense of belonging and community in the multicultural classroom. For further context and information for using this activity in pursuit of identity development, see Muhammad's *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*

[7] For more on implementing a growth mindset in your classroom, see Annie Brock and Heather Hundley.

A simple but tangible illustration of this compassionate approach, or extension of grace, is evident in how a teacher handles a student who has fallen asleep in class. Instead of resorting to startling methods like throwing objects or banging on desks, a teacher practicing grace might gently touch the student's shoulder, acknowledge their drowsiness discreetly, and suggest they take a break for a drink of water. Rather than reading the student's behavior as disrespectful, the teacher gives them the benefit of the doubt by recognizing that there are many valid causes for fatigue. The student may have worked a late shift or been caring for younger siblings, etc. And even if the student is only tired because they stayed up late playing video games, approaching them with grace costs me nothing. It does, however, signal to the student that I prioritize their well-being and value an environment conducive to creative and intellectual risk-taking.

Conclusion

In conclusion, centering joy in the classroom through authentic pedagogy, mindfulness, and purpose is essential for creating meaningful, equitable, and fulfilling learning experiences. By fostering genuine connections, educators can move beyond the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and prioritize real-time interactions that nurture student engagement and joy. Authentic pedagogy, grounded in mindfulness and purpose, enhances the sustainability of the teaching profession by promoting self-awareness, presence, and grace. These practices not only support academic achievement but also cultivate a sense of purpose and intrinsic joy in students, encouraging lifelong learning. As demonstrated by educators like Christensen, Hammond, and Muhammad, rigorous academic standards can coexist with a joyful learning environment. By embracing these principles, educators can empower students to navigate the complexities of a diverse and technology-driven world, ultimately contributing to a more just and joyful society.

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Cultivating Joy Through Digital Pleasure Reading: Whose Pleasure Is It Anyway?

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Many English teachers have fond memories of devouring classics and participating in high-level discussions in college seminars led by professors who thoroughly enjoyed deconstructing texts. Love of literature drew many of us to the profession, and we try to replicate our own joyful experiences with reading in our classrooms. For some students, it works. However, many students simply do not connect with the same texts that bring us pleasure. If we focus only—or perhaps even predominantly—on reading that is inaccessible because it is not relevant to their lives, we risk alienating students and contributing to what Kelly Gallagher calls "readicide." Furthermore, as Gallagher points out, English teachers have a bad habit of taking texts that students might find pleasurable and killing their potential for joy with reading guides, quizzes, and teacher-centered activities. Katherine Marsh made a similar claim in a recent *Atlantic* article, "Why Kids Aren't Falling in Love With Reading," arguing that due to the influence of standardized testing, teachers across the grade levels have prioritized close reading activities over those that might generate more pleasure for students.

In short, we might be killing our students' joy of reading in one of two ways: (1) we focus on texts that we love (or that someone who wrote the curriculum loved), rather than on texts that teens find fulfilling, and (2) we make reading "schoolish" (Whitney, p. 55). If our goal is to engage our students in reading that brings pleasure, perhaps we should start by asking, "whose pleasure is it that a particular text invokes?"

Let's reflect for a moment on our own reading experiences. While many English teachers love a particular classic tome, canonical author, or literary time period, there are others among us who prefer nonfiction. Throughout our own education, we were likely assigned texts that felt like a slog (how many of us actually enjoyed *The Iliad*?), and we abandoned them for something more pleasurable. In our current lives, it's likely that many of us read short-form and/or digital texts for pleasure, and some of us may even prefer writing to reading. Even as English majors who teach English, our tastes are varied.

So why is it that when given a choice, we often choose a whole-class text, perhaps one that we ourselves love, and try to inspire joy in every student? Whose pleasure are we actually attending to? English is one of many subjects secondary students engage with during the school day, and very few of the students who enter our classrooms will go on to become English majors, lovers of classic literature. Our role as English

teachers is to prepare adolescents for the literacies they will need beyond the classroom. Our goal is to instill a love of text and learning. To that end, we need to broaden our view of classroom text and value the kinds of real-world texts that bring many teens pleasure. Increasingly, teens read digitally and in many forms. As English teachers, we can cultivate their love of reading in digital spaces, even as we help them to become critical consumers, close readers, and ethical users of digital texts.

Why Digital Texts for Pleasure?

By digital texts, we mean the range of short-, mid-, and longform texts that teens read on screens (Turner and Hicks). These texts may resemble print-based books (e.g., an e-book version of a print book), or they may include elements such as audio, images, video, hyperlinks, and interactive features. In a study of teens' reading practices, Turner and Hicks found that teens read longform texts (e.g., digital books, multimedia journalism), mid-form texts (e.g., blogs, articles, fan-fiction), and short-form texts (e.g., social media posts, messages, search results). Zucker found that teens were more likely to read mid- and short-form texts when reading online for both academic and personal purposes.

Reading for pleasure is often defined in the literature as voluntary reading practices across a range of texts (Cremin). While it can be argued that reading pleasure is a valuable end in and of itself, there's a history of research that correlates pleasure reading with academic achievement (Krashen; Torrpa et al.). Building on this body of work, Wilhelm and Smith studied teens' out-of-school pleasure reading in genres not typically endorsed by schools (e.g., dystopian fiction, romance, horror) and found that teen readers experienced four distinct kinds of pleasure from their reading: "the pleasure of play, intellectual pleasure, social pleasure, and the pleasure of work, both functional work and psychological inner work" (*Reading Unbound* p. 25). To cultivate lifelong reading habits, Wilhelm and Smith argue that teachers should centralize pleasure ("Two Principles"). In this vein, when we conceptualize the ways in which students read for pleasure, we would be remiss to ignore the vast majority of digital reading practices that engage youth on mass scales, including social media texts and digital fiction (Anderson, Faverio, and Gottfried). Through digital texts, we have the opportunity to tap into the varied pleasures that Wilhelm and Smith uncovered.

We know that student choice increases reading motivation (Guthrie and Wigfield). In fact, many adolescents report lower engagement with reading that may result from a disconnect between their interests and the texts assigned in class (Webber et al.). Thus, many English teachers have shifted their curriculum away from whole-class novels towards more student-selected choice texts as independent reading books or literature circle books. Giving our students the autonomy to choose their own texts while providing support to make informed choices can help them select texts that will bring them pleasure.

When they are learning in digital spaces, teens are able to seek out and interact with fellow readers online who share their interests (Ito et al.). In our studies of digital reading, we have found that teens adopted "connected reading" practices, finding new texts of interest to them, engaging with those texts in meaningful ways, and then sharing texts they valued with other readers (Turner and Hicks; Hicks, et al.; Zucker). In fact, recent work has drawn upon literature and reading communities through digital spaces, including Jerasa and Buffone's exploration of BookTok, an online reading community through TikTok, and its parallels to

traditional reading circles often cultivated in ELA classrooms. Through this space, teens are able to create content related to texts on- and offline and engage in digital literacy practices, including discussion, that deepen their understanding of texts while allowing them to explore the digital spaces that permeate their lives.

The features and flexibility of digital texts can make reading more pleasurable. For example, accessibility features such as text-to-speech options, complexity or reading level adjustments, and display options can make a digital text more legible and/or comprehensible than a print version. In our conversations with teens about their digital reading, high school students have often described their appreciation for digital text features such as the ability to search within a text, the ease of accessing a dictionary, and/or the benefits of digital annotation tools such as highlighting or comments (Turner et al.; Zucker).

While changing the curriculum is not a small task, curricular standards may even lend themselves to this type of shift. English curricula may have traditionally been organized around texts or literary time periods or movements; skill-based standards allow English teachers to address those skills through a variety of text types, including digital texts.

Stretching Students' Comfort Zones

As English teachers, we have a responsibility to strengthen comprehension skills across a variety of texts and equip students with the skills they need to navigate society upon graduation. Through exposure to multiple texts, we may also foster a genuine love of reading and learning. One frequently overlooked way this can be accomplished is through the study of digital texts for pleasure. Though teens encounter a range of digital texts in their out-of-school lives, exposure in the classroom may broaden their interests and introduce them to new ideas, increasing their ability to navigate these texts critically and efficiently.

Many educators and parents de-value digital texts, particularly short-form texts found through social media or news bytes, raising concerns about diminished literacy skills and increased screen time. And indeed, digital reading can amount to mindless scrolling, as Nicholas Carr famously argued in *The Shallows* and research has concluded (Annisette and Lafreniere), but it can also present opportunities for teachers to help their students engage more mindfully (Zucker; Turner and Hicks; Hicks). We know that teens read a lot of short-form texts online and are not necessarily evaluating those texts critically (Turner and Hicks; Besharat Mann). Without support for using these texts, shallow reading may increase as students scroll through texts quickly without engaging deeply or critically evaluating. Digital reading provides ample teaching opportunities to help students read more critically, think about misinformation, and notice algorithms. Authentic practice with these skills may help to strengthen deeper reading through short form texts, particularly when coupled with longer form texts in the classroom.

When readers see texts they encounter and engage with outside of school in the classroom, teachers can build upon these texts and challenge students with higher level, more complex texts. Readers are motivated by a certain degree of challenge (Guthrie and Wigfield), but if a text is too difficult, the student might be overwhelmed. Teachers can help students find their reading "sweet spot" with texts that are not too easy and not too hard. For example, we have the "five-finger" method to help young children evaluate the difficulty of a text: ("hold up a finger each time you encounter a word that's too difficult; if you encounter more than five

words on a page, that book is probably too hard"). How can we tell when a digital text is too challenging? Vocabulary is one measure of difficulty, but there are many others. We need explicit instructional strategies to help teen readers metacognitively monitor their digital reading skills and self-select digital texts that are "just right." We offer a few examples of how this might look in an ELA classroom.

Independent Reading via Podcasts

In Lauren Zucker's high school English classroom, students select a podcast to listen to for an independent reading unit. Lauren first introduces students to the genre of the podcast (having learned that most of her students over the years have never listened to a podcast), and then previews a curated selection of podcasts, including many that have been recommended by Lauren's former students. This contemporary "book talk" allows students to think about what topics might interest them. As their first assignment, they listen to the first 15-minutes of three different self-selected podcasts as a sampling before selecting one as their final choice.

Since Lauren may not be familiar with all of the choices and topics, she communicates the details of the assignment in advance, and enlists parents to support their child in their selection of an interesting and appropriate podcast, just as she does when students choose their own books. When a student is finished listening to a particular podcast—when they've completed all of the episodes, or when it is time to move on—Lauren requires that students' subsequent choice reflect a different genre, to encourage students to broaden their interests. In other words, if they listened to *Serial* (which remains the top choice among Lauren's students), they cannot listen to another true crime podcast next.

Ultimately, though, the true goal of this unit is to expose students to a new type of text that they will (hopefully) find pleasurable that might fit into their modern, adult reading lives. When they reflect on this learning, many of Lauren's students have said that they appreciated the flexibility of a podcast and enjoyed listening while working out, waiting for the bus, or completing other homework.

Some may argue that listening to a podcast is not "real reading." In our own research, we found that a majority of our students do not consider any of their reading of digital texts or participation in digital spaces to be "real reading" (Turner and Hicks; Hicks, et al.; Zucker). But research shows that audiobooks and podcasts can promote reading interest and engagement (Best). Despite concerns that "ear reading" an audiobook is inferior to print reading, a recent study demonstrated that listening to an audiobook versus reading the same book in print activated similar regions of the brain (Deniz). Commenting on this study, *School Library Journal* stated, "it means readers worried about taking the easy way out with audiobooks can stop feeling guilty" (Yorio).

Fostering Inquiry With Interest-Based Reading

Jill Stedronsky's middle school students read constantly. Sometimes Jill selects whole-class texts—book chapters, digital articles, videos—and models her own reading before asking her students to dig in. They use a "sparks and starts" journal to document their thinking and response as they read. They use "book thought" journals to capture their response to self-selected books, which they are free to abandon at any time. This reading leads them to inquiry questions, which they explore over the course of the school year, following paths of interest and finding texts that fuel their learning (Stedronsky).

Jill purposefully shares different kinds of texts—TedTalks, podcasts, blogs, infographics—to demonstrate that reading happens in all kinds of spaces and with all kinds of texts. Jill selects texts that can serve as mentor texts for her students, who gather inspiration from these texts and use them to spark their own writing about topics of interest to them. Her students, in turn, find texts that inspire them to keep reading. Jill values all of the texts they bring to the classroom as possibilities for inquiry fueled by passion. They find joy in their reading because it is authentic to their learning and their growth as humans (Stedronsky and Turner).

Making Space for Passion Projects

Both Ivelisse Ramos (high school) and Emilie Jones (middle school), who teach English Language Arts in an urban context, have incorporated "passion projects" (Jones, et al., 44) as full units. Students have the opportunity to research their own interests based on the question, "What am I passionate about? What are problems I want to solve? What do I want to create?" (45). They find that students investigate a variety of topics, reading many different kinds of texts along the way. Most importantly, students shared that the work was "fun" (p. 48).

Kristen Hawley Turner's daughter, Megan, also found joy in reading when her history teacher adopted "20 percent time" (Gonzalez). One class period per week, Megan was allowed to explore her interests. She started reading about audio and video production and created a series of tutorials related to what she learned. Her reading continued well beyond the class and into the next year, when she wrote, recorded, produced, and distributed her own music album. Four years after her teacher allowed her to read what brought her pleasure, she continues to read daily to improve her craft and to connect with others who have similar interests.

Inviting Conversation and Exploration in College Using Digital Texts

Higher education poses a unique space to incorporate digital reading practices, particularly as many universities incorporate digital classroom formats including Moodle and Blackboard to curate classroom resources. Rachel Besharat Mann's undergraduate students engage with a mixture of digital and traditional texts that complement each other both in skill usage and content. Each week students immerse themselves in a particular topic and are provided seminal readings to ground their foundational understanding. Rachel invites students to explore digital commentary on topical ideas to help them gain understanding through multiple perspectives and to bring these voices into class for discussion. For example, in a unit exploring the impact of social media and adolescent mental health, Rachel had students search for commentary across the internet from a variety of sources they typically interact with (including social media itself) to read and bring to class for analysis. Students are encouraged to read user comments and public discourse. The parameters for this exploration were intentionally broad to allow students to use their platforms in ways they wanted to and to place value on texts they encounter regularly.

This type of learning activity gives autonomy to learners and entrusts them to navigate digital spaces authentically, lending value to their digital literacy practices while acknowledging the importance of digital discourse. Students are encouraged to engage in their traditional practices, including spaces where they communicate with others, to center their voices and drive discussion in the classroom. The aim here is to provide an opportunity for joy in this

acknowledgement—giving credence to the practices learners already engage in within the academic context. Students have remarked that these readings feel refreshing compared to denser course texts and appreciate the independence in finding texts they find enjoyable. Students are also encouraged to work together, facilitating the social aspect of reading and including their joyful practices in the conceptualization of reading for class. Social interaction and discussion around relevant texts can foster an appreciation and love for reading, creating a space for joy in typical academic reading tasks (Merga).

How to Incorporate Digital Pleasure Reading

We are not advocating for teachers to do away with print-based texts. And we acknowledge that many teachers are required to cover a certain number or list of texts in a given school year. However, we do see many missed opportunities and places where digital texts can fit naturally into a rich, diverse, and pleasurable English Language Arts curriculum.

For example, units on media, information, and/or digital literacy are natural places to integrate a variety of digital texts. While teachers may look to ELA resources such as Marchetti and O'Dell's *A Teacher's Guide to Mentor Texts* to select digital texts, we can draw upon our students' literacies and cultures by inviting them to share their own digital texts, both as mentor texts and as recommendations for peers. Through exposure to a wide variety of texts, students may identify new text forms and genres to read for pleasure, both in and out of the classroom.

Research and/or inquiry projects that allow students to follow their passions, rather than teacher-designed questions or topics, can lend themselves to the inclusion of a variety of digital texts, including infographics, social media posts, and online videos. Just as teachers might require students to incorporate at least one print source, teachers might also require students to seek out a variety of digital text types related to topics they care about. Content area teachers can model the ways in which they may use digital texts to find information about topics of interest. This scaffold gives learners a sound model for navigating digital spaces while acknowledging the legitimacy of digital texts.

When we picture sustained silent reading, we probably still envision a room of students holding physical books. But as described in the examples above, independent reading can be a time to invite students to read digital texts for pleasure, including those outside of the genres they typically gravitate towards. Educators should take care not to over-police the use of these texts to allow for authentic use of digital spaces and student autonomy.

Avoid Schoolifying Digital Texts

When we invite students to read texts they would select for pleasure outside of our classrooms, we must be careful not to appropriate those texts for activities that undermine that pleasure. We can provide the time and space for pleasure reading to be an end in and of itself.

Many English teachers have walked this fine line by asking students to analyze their favorite song lyrics as poetry. We can spark pleasure by asking students to share a text that is meaningful to them and engage in some light analysis—perhaps selecting and discussing a favorite quote—but we risk snuffing out pleasure if our instructions are too technical or burdensome. Our best course of action is to call attention to the kinds of reading that students do outside of class and value that reading as part of what

we do in class by asking students to reflect on when, how, and why they read.

If we want to engage students in reflective work around their digital pleasure reading, we can ask questions that gently prompt students to practice metacognitive monitoring by thinking about the choices they make as they select and interact with digital texts. Questions such as:

- Where did you find this text?
- Why did you select it?
- What do you think about it? How do you feel when you are reading it, and why?
- In what ways has this text influenced you as a person?
- How would you describe this text to someone else?
- Would you recommend this text to someone else? Why or why not?
- Will you engage with other kinds of texts like this one? Why or why not?
- Where or how might you find similar texts that will bring you joy?

There is still a place in our curriculum for close reading and critical analysis (the types of activities often associated with whole-class texts), but teachers can find their own whole-class digital texts to model and practice those literacy skills. If we are choosing only canonical literature for these whole-class moments, we aren't choosing the kinds of texts that bring the most people joy.

Added Benefits of Digital Pleasure Reading

When we invite students to read digital texts for pleasure in a classroom environment, they are likely to reap some added benefits. For example, we might open up new genres and modes for students to find things that they enjoy reading. As in the podcast classroom example, Lauren's students may realize that the podcast is a genre they enjoy and want to return to in the future. Through students' personal exploration of digital texts, and from witnessing the selections of their peers, students can broaden their reading tastes.

Ongoing practice with digital reading also can boost students' digital literacy skills. Researchers have found that digital reading requires additional literacy skills beyond those required of print texts (Leu et al.) In our research, we found that while many texts are available in both print and digital format, teen readers have context-specific preferences when given a choice between these formats (Zucker and Turner). Teens must practice reading flexibly across contexts and can grow more comfortable reading and annotating in a digital format when given direct instruction for doing so (Hicks, et al.). English teachers can help students cultivate both comfort and pleasure across print and digital contexts.

Exploration of digital texts allows learners to explore online discourse surrounding historical concepts and current events. Recent research has pointed to the contentious spaces that often exist online, particularly through comments and interactions about different topics, that our students are faced with daily (Ortega-Sánchez and Alonso; Garcia and Mirra). Authentic practice within these spaces and student-led analysis of online discourse can help to create life-long learners who engage in these spaces safely and efficiently.

According to Naomi Baron, we are currently engaged in a "new great debate in reading," where we are forced to grapple with the idea of whether text medium — audio, digital, paper, and beyond—matters in reading. Though this debate has implications for a wide range of groups, it is particularly pertinent to English teachers who must decide how to address the proliferation of texts available through non-traditional modalities while meeting the

learning needs of their students.

Finding Pleasure (Again) in English Language Arts

We became English teachers because English Language Arts brings us pleasure. And while we are not training an army of future English majors or English teachers, it is a worthwhile goal to create a learning environment that our students find pleasurable. Creating space for students to develop their interests and interact with texts that bring them joy can help educators to instill a lasting love of learning and text. One way to accomplish this is by making space for digital pleasure reading. Encouraging these practices can expand the definition of reading and legitimate texts for our students and allow them to fully explore the increasingly digital world around them.

This is not to say that the study of classic texts or contemporary novels cannot ignite curiosity, pose a worthwhile challenge, or invite readers to think about the world in a new way. However, digital texts also have the potential to invoke these benefits, and by including them, we might promote more pleasure for a greater number of our students while still supporting their literacy development. It is our hope that through the incorporation of a wide variety of texts for targeted skill instruction and simply for pleasure's sake, English Language Arts class can be pleasurable for all.

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Joyful Learning: Station Rotation Activities in a High School English Class

ANNIE YON
Fair Lawn High School

"The next novel we will be reading is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Everybody, stand up from your seats and move toward the center of the room. On the SmartBoard, you will see a slide with a statement. If you agree with the statement, you will move to the left side; if you disagree, head over to the right side of the room. Are you ready?"

My juniors nodded eagerly as the screen emitted the statement: "In our society, a college degree from a 'prestigious' university makes you have a higher social status." Seventeen students shuffled over to the left and eight students moved to the right.

I asked, "Who wants to start first?"

Multiple hands sprung up, and Robert* claimed, "I think a college degree is important because it can help with social mobility and increased job opportunities, but I don't think going to a 'prestigious' university makes you *more* socially accepted. You can go to a lesser-known college with a full scholarship instead of having debt at a 'top' college. I would respect the financially responsible person more."

Alicia countered, "*But* if I introduce a random person and say she's a student at Harvard University, you'd be more impressed than if I said she was from some small college in Minnesota. This shows that prestige is important." Students added to the conversation buttressing both Alicia's and Robert's arguments; some of their classmates even switched sides chuckling, "I disagreed with the statement initially, but Alicia made a good point."

For the entire 45-minute period, students shuffled back and forth across the room arguing their opinions for each thematic statement. When I announced that class was over, a few students incredulously looked at the clock and voiced, "Wow, already? This period flew by!"

The Issue: Lack of Joy in the Classroom

Alfie Kohn, an American author and lecturer in the areas of education and human behavior, asserts in his essay "Feel-Bad Education" that "joy has been in short supply in some classrooms because students tend to be regarded not as subjects but as objects, not as learners but as workers." He explains that students are forced to sit through prefabricated lessons in a sterile classroom, whose purpose is not to promote thinking, much less the joy of discovery, but to raise test scores. In other words, richer thinking cannot come from monotonous multiple-choice exams or never-ending worksheets but from "an atmosphere of exuberant discovery" (Kohn). Similarly, Dr. Judy Willis, a board-certified neurologist and classroom teacher, discusses the benefits of joy in the classroom in her essay "The Neuroscience of Joyful Education":

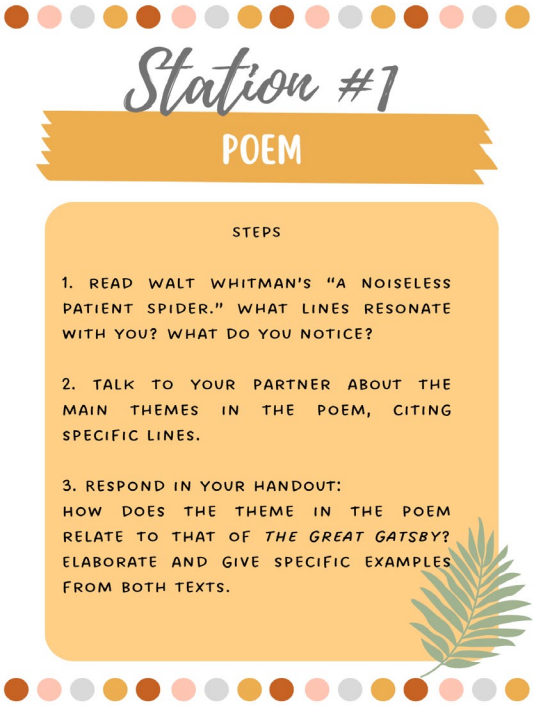
> Lessons that are more stimulating and challenging are more likely to pass through the reticular activating system. When classroom activities are pleasurable, the brain releases dopamine, a neurotransmitter that stimulates the memory centers and promotes the

release of acetylcholine, which increases focused attention.

Ultimately, Dr. Willis contends that when creating lessons, educators should consider novelty, stress-free classrooms, and pleasurable associations linked with learning as these factors lead to more dopamine, focused attention, and enhanced information retention.

Rotation Stations for *The Great Gatsby*

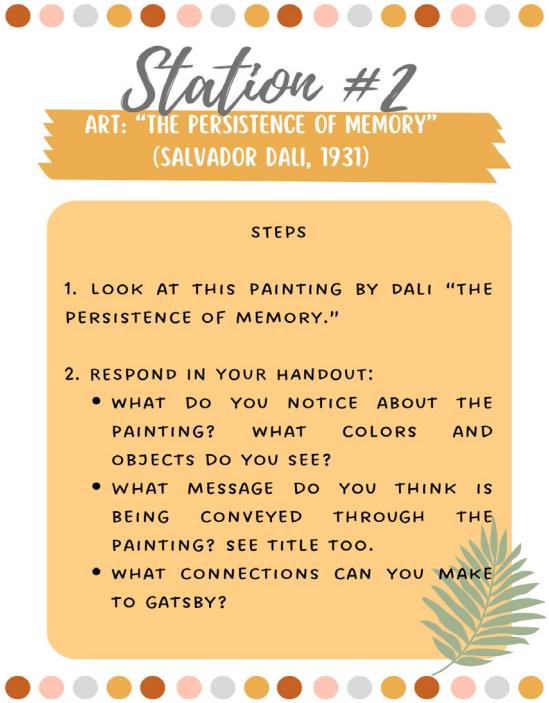
After three weeks, my students had finished reading *The Great Gatsby*, and I had planned a rotation station lesson. Rather than listening to the teacher lecture for 45 minutes in rows and columns, I wanted my juniors to move around, collaborate, and learn from their peers as they did with the thematic debate at the start of the unit. Mina Gavell, a seasoned teacher, discusses how task-based reading activities, such as rotation stations, create "a student-centered class with many opportunities for communication because as students are working in pairs, they offer support to one another and negotiate answers." In addition, station activities "provide the extrinsic push—after all, it is a class assignment—but also sets up an environment for intrinsic motivation in the form of a fun and interactive activity […] thereby setting themselves up for greater success and a sense of accomplishment" (Gavell 3). In creating this lesson, my objective was for students to be stimulated and engaged throughout the entire lesson while gaining new insights about *The Great Gatsby*. I assembled five stations of diverse activities and set the timer for eight minutes each. Students were strategically put into pairs with one handout for their responses; two-three pairs were then dispersed to different stations and rotated clockwise.



Station 1: Walt Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider"

In station 1, students read Walt Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider." Their task was to determine the poem's meaning then eventually make text-to-text connections. When students were stuck, I scaffolded by asking the following questions: *What might the speaker mean in the last few lines when he mentions 'seeking the spheres to connect them'? What might be the 'gossamer thread' that Gatsby 'tirelessly tries to fling'? How is Gatsby also 'isolated' and 'detached' from the group he wants to be part of?*

Most students started talking right away, mentioning topics of loneliness and the importance of meaningful relationships. For example, Silvia and Jessica discussed, "I think the theme could be about isolation. The spider is alone and 'surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space.' It reminds me of Gatsby because regardless of how many people showed up to his parties to relish in his wealth, in the end, no one



showed up when it truly mattered—at his funeral—despite how many calls were made. They're both alone and neglected." Another pair, Casey and Miriam, added to the conversation, "The spider is trying to build its web 'launch[ing] forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself, ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them' and seeks connection. This is similar to Gatsby's discipline and drive in trying to attain his goal of being with Daisy in her world of East Egg." As students wrapped up this station and jotted down their final interpretations, they gave each other high-fives saying, "Good job!"

Station 2: Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory"

In station 2, students looked at Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory" and used visual thinking strategies to analyze the painting. Students made observations about the painting by responding to these questions: *What's going on in this picture? What do you notice that makes you say that? What more can you find?*

Jacob started, "The landscape is barren. There's a cliff, a tree with only branches, and a lot of clocks. The clocks are melting or warped. I know Dali is known for surrealism. What is that fleshy thing? Is that an eyelash?"

Mary proposed, "Maybe the repeated image of clocks symbolizes something about time? Oh! The title is 'The Persistence of Memory.' So could the painting be about time and memory?"

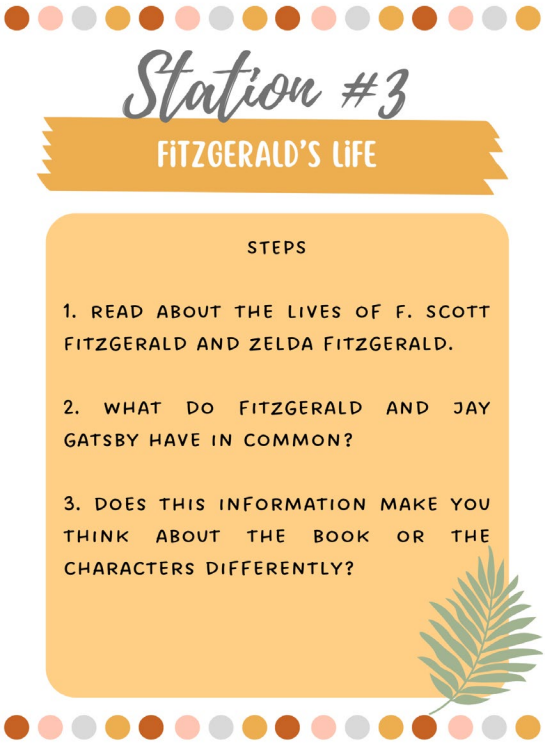
Jacob replied, "Ants…melting clocks…surrealism…memory. Maybe it conveys the idea that memories persist but can change over time; memories become distorted or warped."

Esther shared, "I think the drooping clocks symbolize that time isn't real here or that it fades. Wait, all the clocks show the same time; time is frozen."

Mary had an epiphany: "In *The Great Gatsby*, time is relative. Gatsby is stuck in the past and to him, it doesn't matter that five years have passed. He remembers every tiny detail of Daisy. Even though Gatsby is persistent in thinking that Daisy is still the same girl he fell for, she's married to Tom now. The painting shows a vast empty land; it's kind of like the emptiness of Gatsby's life. Gatsby only focused on Daisy, but she betrayed him and didn't even attend his funeral." As opposed to a solitary reader response paragraph, peer learning and exposure to diverse perspectives through a small group discussion led to higher engagement, improved communication skills, and an enhanced understanding of both the painting and story.

Station 3: Fitzgerald's Biography

In station 3, students briefly read over Fitzgerald's biography and were asked to make connections between the author's life and Gatsby's. As one partner read the printed article, the other continued to jot down facts about the author's life.



"It seems that both the author and Jay Gatsby believed that if they became wealthy, they could get 'the girl' and live happily ever after. Zelda broke off their engagement because of Scott Fitzgerald's paltry salary and only married him after he published *This Side of Paradise.* Likewise, Gatsby was only able to gain Daisy's attention by pretending to be on the same stratum as her. He gave her a false sense of security until he became rich," David said.

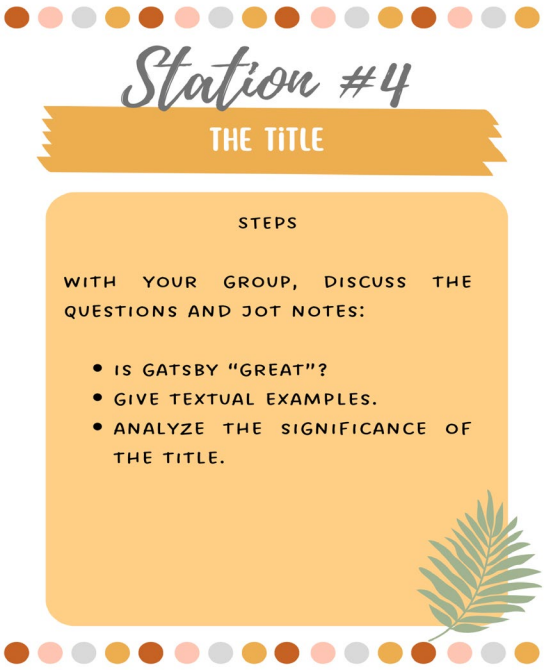
"Both Gatsby and Fitzgerald enlisted in the army. The story takes place in the Roaring Twenties, and Fitzgerald includes his own life experiences from 1920s. They both have downfalls too; the author falls victim to alcoholism then dies of a heart attack, and Gatsby is shot by Wilson and becomes the scapegoat for all the crimes," Kayla noted.

David replied, "Wow. Fitzgerald literally is Gatsby. His wealth didn't provide him with happiness, and he struggled with issues in his life." This station activity was much more impactful than a teacher lecturing and students memorizing facts; discovery learning allowed them to take on a more active role in making meaning and text-to-text connections.

Station 4: The Significance of the Title

In station 4, students read a quote taken from *The Great Gatsby* and discussed the following questions: *Why do you think the title is called The Great Gatsby? In your opinion, is Gatsby "great"? Does this "greatness" provide him with what he wants?* Similar to the pre-reading activity where students had to agree or disagree with thematic statements, in this activity, students enjoyed debating their perspectives on why they thought the title was misleading or accurate.

For example, Anna and Nathan argued, "The title is deceiving, and we don't think Gatsby is great. He had no meaningful relationships as seen with the lack of attendance at his funeral. He was just a man who threw parties for an unachieved goal."



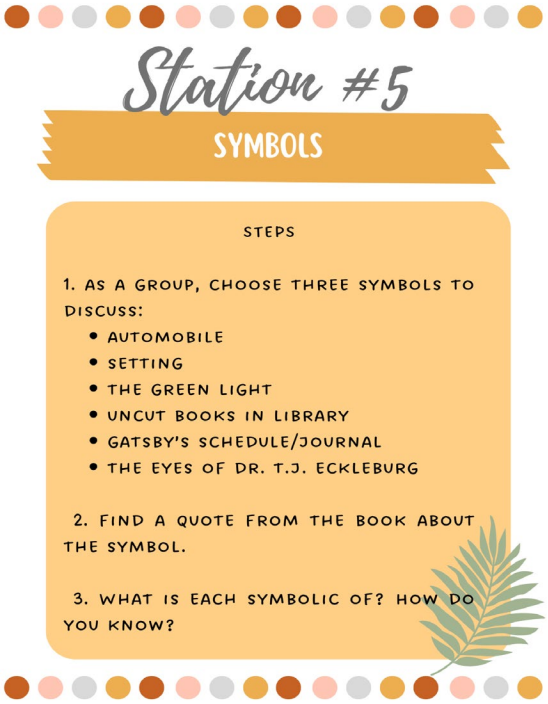
Gloria counterargued, "Gatsby is 'great' because even though he couldn't be with Daisy, his rags-to-riches story and

'extraordinary gift for hope' are quite rare and admirable. He stayed dedicated to the 'promises of life' and his dream like an 'intricate machine.' He never strayed from his goal, which makes him 'great.'"

Nathan jumped back in: "Rags-to-riches, yes, but he lived a corrupt lifestyle and made his money illegally working with Wolfsheim! How can you say he's 'great'?"

Taylor supported Gloria: "He turned his entire life around, starting as a poor clam digger and salmon fisher to becoming this illustrious and wealthy man. It shows the depths of his perseverance and optimism."

This station buzzed with their zealous opinions on their perspectives of whether Gatsby deserved to be called "great." In this station, students listened to diverse opinions, which led to cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance "facilitates the cognitive processes of accommodation and assimilation, which are central to knowledge development; learners are presented with new knowledge and must expend mental effort to integrate this information into their existing schema" (Adcock). Students were encouraged to think more deeply, and the process strengthened their critical thinking skills and metacognitive abilities.



Station 5: Symbolism

Copies of *The Great Gatsby* were scattered on the desks along with six images of symbols to analyze. Tiffany and Evan wrote about automobiles in the story: "Automobiles represent the carelessness of the people in the Roaring Twenties. For instance, Owl Eyes was involved in a car accident after Gatsby's party. Tom Buchanan was caught with a chambermaid after a car accident. Daisy killed Myrtle while driving. People were drinking and driving. Cars are a symbol for destruction and the drivers' reckless behaviors."

Teresa and Anastasia discussed the green light at the end of Daisy's dock: "Oh, this is a good quote. 'Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us.' He was optimistic about his American dream to the very end—the one with Daisy and the old money world she lives in—but it was beyond his grasp."

Sarah and Alicia explained the symbolism of the uncut book in Gatsby's library: "This is a good quote about the uncut books: 'It's a bona-fide piece of printed matter. This fella's a regular Belasco. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too—didn't cut the pages!' Owl Eyes also says that if one book is removed from the shelf, the whole library would collapse. Everything Gatsby does or says is a facade; he wants to depict himself as someone intelligent and well-read, but he hasn't ever read these books. They're all for show; he's a fraud." Students continued to revisit the novel, work together to find quotes, analyze, and discuss the significance of the symbols they chose. In this station, symbolism was an accessible vantage point for students to analyze.

Student Reflections: "That was fun!"

When the period was over, Helen repeated to her group and me, "This was so fun! Every station was creative and interactive. I liked how we got to talk to our partners and hear all the different thoughts people had about the same topic. Can we do this again with our next book?" I asked students to write a reflection to assess their engagement with the station activities and see what their takeaways were. They responded to the following questions: *What was your favorite and least favorite station? Discuss your experience collaborating with your partner and group. What new information did you learn from this activity that might've enhanced your understanding of The Great Gatsby?*

Robert wrote, "This activity was fun because it wasn't all work, and I got to share my ideas with everyone. My favorite station was the painting one because it was creative, and we all had different ideas about its meaning. If I had to answer the questions alone, then I wouldn't have learned or seen multiple insights that people had about the artwork." Alicia agreed: "It was interesting to pinpoint the little details in the painting, find meaning, and make connections among the painting, book, and our lives. We talked about the volatility of time and memories." In addition to the "The Persistence of Memory" station, many students enjoyed station 4, in which they discussed whether Gatsby is "great." Rishi shared, "This station was enjoyable because while we had various opinions, we concluded that Gatsby is inspirational because of his optimism and determination in chasing after his dream." Jose added, "I liked that station too because everyone in my group had a different idea of what 'greatness' means, and I got to see how many people besides myself admired Gatsby just as I did." Furthermore, I also learned that students enjoyed station 3. Esther explained, "Station 3 was my favorite because we looked into Fitzgerald and Zelda's lives, and I saw how much of Fitzgerald's life was like Gatsby's." Javit added, "Station 3 enhanced my understanding of *The Great Gatsby* because it showed me that while Fitzgerald and Gatsby obtained their goals of becoming wealthy, money didn't buy complete happiness." Olivia concluded, "Even though I dislike biographies, I liked reading about Fitzgerald and how the author included personal moments from his life into his writing. It made the story more meaningful."

What I found amusing was how diverse the answers were when it came to students' most and least favorite stations. For instance, while some students raved about how much they enjoyed the art station since "meaning doesn't come only from text but also visuals," others voiced that this was their least favorite "because it was difficult to interpret what the image meant and there wasn't a clear and objective answer." Furthermore, while some students shared that they liked the symbols station because "symbols reveal a lot about the book's themes, and it was rewarding identifying the symbols, such as the repeated car accidents," others expressed, "it was difficult to find a quote and analyze the symbols' meanings." In addition, some students mentioned, "It's difficult to say what [their] favorite station was, because each allowed [them] to see the bigger picture of the book and served a purpose."

My Takeaways: What Does Joyful Learning Look Like?

My takeaway from the whole class discussion and student reflections was that my juniors found pleasure in collaborating with a partner and other pairs in the station because "diverse ideas were being exchanged, which allowed them to look at the topic and the story in a novel way." Students voiced that they were engaged the

entire time because they were "bouncing off each other's ideas" and the conversation felt "safe and comfortable" even though their opinions differed. They concluded that the station rotation activities were interactive and fun just like the pre-reading debate we started the *The Great Gatsby* unit with because instead of just sitting in columns and rows and completing worksheets, they got to move around the room and participate in tasks together. Learning stations helped to foster student engagement and made my students into active rather than passive learners. In fact, hands-on exercises and activities promoted social involvement among students, leading to cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement (Purinton and Burke 134). Because of this increased engagement and diverse task-based activities, students felt a sense of satisfaction and pleasure, especially when they discovered and constructed the text's meaning as a team. While rotation stations take meticulous planning and preparation, they are beneficial, even in a high school setting, in creating joyful student-based discussions and preventing redundant and mundane instruction and assessments. Ultimately, by reducing the number of solitary assessments—like multiple-choice and open-ended quizzes to test the students' knowledge of a book—and replacing them with stimulating and engaging lessons—such as rotation stations that focus on student-led learning, collaboration, diverse task-based activities, and movement—teachers can instill joyful teaching and cease those moments of students begrudgingly counting down the minutes until class is over.

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ANNIE YON is an English teacher at Fair Lawn High School. Entering her twelfth year, she teaches AP Seminar, English 11 Honors, and Senior Topics: Madness in Literature. She majored in English Education and minored in Creative Writing in Montclair State University and received her Masters in Teaching of English at Columbia University. She is also a Teacher Consultant for the Drew Writing Project, a site of the National Writing Project. She is passionate about pedagogy, research and writing.

Prose Poem With a Timer Set

OONA M. ABRAMS
Millburn Township School District

In my imagination lives another poet, much, much younger than myself who sits on some sepia-edged corner sipping coffee and nibbling a chocolate pastry (minus the crumbs because those are not very poetic). This poet has long, shiny brunette hair like the women in Pantene commercials and a moleskin notebook with impressionist painting on the cover. This poet has no obligations, no children, is supported by a rich, elderly, feminist philanthropist who wants more poets in the world who are given time and space to compose. This poet is a ghost, I know, I know, and instead here I sit with a dollar store notebook and ballpoint pen, bundled up in a fleece blanket and sweatshirt and socks because the heat is turned off thanks to spring being here. Before the kids wake up I wonder if by the time I finish writing this and typing it up, evening out the lines, deciding on punctuation, will there be time to put in those hot rollers I plug in so many mornings only to unplug later? Will there be time after all the sandwich making and cereal bowl supervision and toothbrushing reminders to apply some makeup, or will that bag that comes out every morning get shoved away too? This much I do have in common with that ghost of a poetess: We sip our coffee and wear a uniform of mostly dark colors each day, want more poetry in this life which I guess makes us our own philanthropists who donate time and talent instead of treasure, wish we could spend our time more wisely doing what we love, what matters most, putting pen to paper, loving the people in our lives, breathing in this cool air presently. Noticing things.

OONA MARIE ABRAMS (@oonziela) is the Director of English Language Arts in Millburn Township, New Jersey. Her writing has been published in *English Leadership Quarterly*, *Educational Leadership*, *Educational Viewpoints*, and various educational blogs. She is an active member of NCTE, the Council on English Leadership and New Jersey Council of Teachers of English.

To the Middle School Talent Show Kids

OONA M. ABRAMS
Millburn Township School District

Hey, middle school talent show kids – yeah, all of you
All of you who showed up and got up and stayed up
Has anyone told you yet that you are one collective miracle?

To the kid who sang "A Million Dreams" alone after a group sang it too
To the soloists whose voices shook and cracked or went off key
(Stop replaying it in your head: You showed up, got up, stayed up!)

To the dude who spun a pen in rhythm to The Weeknd,
To the hula-hooping girl in the emerald green dress and ruby slippers,
To the most talented vocalist who said no to a solo and yes to the ensemble,
To the kid who stuck out the tech glitch till the electric guitar got hooked up,
To the songwriter who donned taffeta and invited two friends to sing and play,
To the comic duet whose skit had so many insider jokes, if you know you know,
To the proud ladies rocking accordion polkas and otamatone Imperial Marches,
To the petite trio of synchronized, purple tank-topped, black-legginged dancers,
To the trumpeter who blasted that *Lion King* song from the world's oldest folding chair,

All of you middle school talent show kids who showed up and got up and stayed up:
I promise, if you could do this, here, now, tonight, anything is possible for you. Anything.

So fly that hula hoop up to the moon, sell out Madison Square Garden,
Make a sales pitch to the firm's top client, organize that PTA 5K,
Spin that pen into poems and take that stage at the Second City,
Push all the buttons and pull all the levers it takes to cure cancer,
Dress taffeta-clad mannequins in every window of every storefront,
Feed everyone who is hungry today, or might be hungry tomorrow,

Sing lullabies to your children, grandchildren, great grandchildren,

Because, this, The Middle School Talent Show, makes you *audacious.*

You showed up, you got up, you stayed up, and that makes you

One

Collective

Miracle

OONA MARIE ABRAMS (@oonziela) is the Director of English Language Arts in Millburn Township, New Jersey. Her writing has been published in *English Leadership Quarterly*, *Educational Leadership*, *Educational Viewpoints*, and various educational blogs. She is an active member of NCTE, the Council on English Leadership and New Jersey Council of Teachers of English.

Trying to Read a Poem Written in Invisible Ink

BILL MEISSNER
St. Cloud State University

The page is blank, and you can't see any
words, but you try to imagine them.

If you could only read them, for a moment
you might see the mountains of Nepal,
or the curved shorelines of distant oceans.
You might actually taste
the rare, cool air, or embrace the sand between your toes.

If you could only read them,
you know the words would
draw you in. Perhaps they'd describe
a face, the touch of a hand, an embrace pulling you closer.
Words so intense they will make you
inhale a quick breath, or make you
stop breathing for a moment.

If only you could read them, you might imagine
drifting on a boat made of flowers, staring at
the scarlet horizon at the solstice, or that you have
a whole azure ocean inside you. The words buoy you;
swim in them as long as you can.

The poem's final words beckon you even more,
so you lean so close
that your lips almost touch them.
You can feel the page about to give you a

a paper cut, or a kiss.

You finally understand that the poem loves you,
and you love the poem.
And if you hold the blank paper over a flame,
the way you would hold your first love letter,
you will finally know it by heart.

Where the Poems Find You

BILL MEISSNER
St. Cloud State University

We don't realize they're nearby, but they are:
they might be waiting
in the darkness of coffee grounds
we stare at in the numb morning,
between the yellowed pages of magazines,
hiding on the key ring to a house we used to own,
or in the closet beneath the lost sock
that no longer dreams of dancing.

They're always just outside the door
like a car we didn't know we owned, willing to take us
to a destination that can't be found on any map.
We drive to a landscape of dreams
that seems to be dreaming us:
a meadow dotted with the yellow flowers of stars,
wings of a thousand birds swimming across
the blue pool of the sky,
while, on the horizon, the eye of the
sun opens steadily,
like the first word we're about to write.

The Adolescent Poetic Experience as Supported by a Teacher/Poet's Heartfelt Empathy

JOSEPH S. PIZZO
New Jersey Council of Teachers of English

Joined in a mission to create original poetry–
mature vision blended with youthful angst,
we negotiate a path

Of discoveries and disappointments, desires
and distinctions. Explosions of energy and excitement
buoyed by support and safety–

consideration and consternation replaced by
observations and opinions–encouragement
dampening criticism

Ideas generated with playfulness and perception:
Peaches blossoming into golden orbs bursting with nectar
Clouds transformed into floating mountains of lighthearted ballerinas

Simple smiles healing troubled hearts,
soothing comfort through the beat of reassuring
rhythms, metaphors, and personification.

Delicate fingers crafting selections–
keyboards invite mélanges of explorations–
wafting breezes accenting fields of dahlias,

Editors' Note

Lauren Zucker, PhD
Northern Highlands Regional High School, Montclair State University, and Drew University

Susan Chenelle, PhD
University Academy Charter High School, New Jersey City University

Katie F. Whitley, PhD
Manchester Regional High School, Montclair State University

It is our pleasure to introduce you to the 2024 issue of *New Jersey English Journal* (*NJEJ*). This year's theme is "Cultivating Joyful Teaching and Learning in ELA." In our call for submissions, we asked authors to consider the following questions:

- How can we help our students find joy in learning language and literature? How can we cultivate (or reclaim) it for ourselves as teachers?
- What are the new or tried-and-true ways we can cultivate joyful teaching and learning in our classrooms? What makes teaching and learning ELA joyful in the 21st century?
- What are the unexpected moments or sources of joy in our ELA classrooms? How can we build on them for ourselves and our students?
- How can schools, school leaders, and educators collaborate to create joyful learning communities? How can we push back against practices or policies that disrupt joyful teaching and learning?

This issue features work in three genres: poetry, reflective pieces, and research articles. This issue shares an inspiring variety of ways that ELA teachers are cultivating joy in their classes, such as culturally responsive genre discovery, student-selected digital texts, and authenticity, purpose, and mindfulness. We are proud to share work from writers across the country.

Two secondary ELA teachers, Darlene Calderon and Kayla Sullivan, and ELA teacher educator Emily Smith share vignettes from their classrooms in which they illustrate ways they have nurtured moments of joy in their lessons by centering their students' vulnerability and their own.

In "Centering Joy in the Classroom: Authentic Pedagogy Through Purpose and Mindfulness," E. Mariah Spencer explores the need for authenticity as key to a joyful classroom and outlines the ways in which this authenticity can be achieved. Purpose and mindfulness are the linchpins to creating an authentic and joyful learning environment, she finds.

Annie Yon proposes station rotation activities as a method for restoring the joy and "exuberant discovery" that Alfie Kohn observed as lacking in many classrooms.

Carly Berwick explores how student-led culturally responsive genre discovery can connect to curricular mandates, affirm student knowledge, and spark sustained and engaged student work. She offers four principles for uncovering students' existing, out-of-school genre understandings.

Lauren Zucker, Kristen Hawley Turner, and Rachel Besharat Mann recommend that teachers incorporate student-selected digital texts for pleasure reading in secondary and higher education contexts.

Poetic contributions, such as those from Bill Meissner, Joseph Pizzo, and Oona Abrams, make powerful statements about the particular joys and challenges of teaching English language arts.

Since 2020, when we shifted *NJEJ* to a digital format and uploaded archival issues dating back to 2013, our journal has attracted a wide online readership. As of August 2024, prior to publishing the current issue, our 263 works have 31,400 unique downloads from 179 different countries representing 1,907 institutions. We thank Montclair State University for hosting our journal on their library's Digital Commons repository, which helps readers find our pieces through search engines, institutional databases, and keyword searches.

This year's cover was designed by rising sophomore Prisca Li of Northern Highlands Regional High School, who was nominated for the opportunity by her graphic design teacher, Doreen Albano. Prisca worked in consultation with our editors to execute the design, drawing inspiration from our past several covers designed by Noreen Hosny, winner of the 2020 cover design contest. We look forward to seeing future *NJEJ* cover designs from this talented young artist.

This issue would not be possible without the dedication and service of our reviewers. We also extend our thanks to the NJCTE Board for their recommendations, and to Valerie Mattessich, NJCTE President, for her steadfast leadership and support.

New Jersey English Journal
2024 Issue, Volume 13

New Jersey English Journal is a peer-reviewed publication of New Jersey Council of Teachers of English (NJCTE). This journal is intended to serve our members through the sharing and showcasing of research, best practices, and ideas related to K-12 and college English Language Arts education, and to encourage diverse discussions and inclusion.

NJCTE OPPORTUNITIES

NJEJ REVIEWERS

NJEJ seeks educators with experience in P-12 and/or postsecondary English Language Arts to serve as reviewers. Reviewers are typically asked to read and evaluate 1-2 submissions per year. Instructions to join our reviewer pool can be found on the journal's website: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/

WRITING CONTESTS

NJCTE offers several student writing contests. Please encourage your students to submit to them—and join us as a judge. For more information, see https://www.njcte.org/njcte-writing-contest.

Professional development workshops at the 2024 Spring Conference, "Beyond Boundaries: Exploring Interdisciplinary Literacies," including a session on incorporating visual texts (left) and a session co-run by students and educators (right)

AWARDS

NJCTE offers several awards for teachers and authors. More information about these awards and past award winners are listed on our website: https://www.njcte.org/awards-contests.

- The Muriel Becker Award is the highest honor bestowed on a writer by the New Jersey Council of Teachers of English. It has been given annually since the 1980s to a writer deemed by the Becker Award committee to be someone who reflects the best of positive ideals that inspire young readers to high achievement.

New Jersey writer Alicia Cook accepting the 2024 Muriel R. Becker Award from NJCTE President Valerie Mattessich at the NJCTE Spring Conference.

Keynote speaker Alicia Cook signing books for NJCTE Spring Conference attendees.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Follow us on Instagram at @thenjcte for news and updates about our organization and English Language Arts. Consider sharing your work—a project, an anecdote, some words of inspiration, a classroom story—with our members around the state as a featured guest author on our website, http://www.njcte.org/. We invite you to submit pieces over 500 words to our journal.

CONFERENCES & PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

NJCTE hosts its annual conference in the spring. We hope you will join us as an attendee or presenter! Learn more at https://www.njcte.org/.

Additionally, NJCTE offers professional learning opportunities throughout the year. We also held our Spring Conference on "Joyful Teaching: Reviving Engagement in ELA," tied to this year's journal theme. This year's conference will be held on March 20, 2025, and the theme will

be “Visual Literacy: Curricular Relevance for Modern Students.” We are accepting proposals for presentations through December 13, 2024. Visit the NJCTE website (https://www.njcte.org) for more information.

JOIN NJCTE!

Looking to connect with New Jersey ELA educators and access high-quality, local professional development opportunities? Join NJCTE. Read more about member benefits at https://www.njcte.org/member-benefits.

Subscribe to our mailing list at https://www.njcte.org for information about NJCTE membership and future events.

Current and former members of the NJCTE executive board at the 2024 Spring Conference held at Drew University in collaboration with the Drew Writing Project / Digital Literacies Collaborative.

Valerie Mattessich (right), President of New Jersey Council of Teachers of English, and Kristen Hawley Turner (left), Director of the Drew Writing Project and Director of Teacher Education at Drew University, welcome attendees to the 2024 Spring Conference.

CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS
2025 Issue of *New Jersey English Journal*

New Jersey English Journal, a peer-reviewed publication of New Jersey Council of Teachers of English, invites you to share submissions on the theme, **"Bridging Literacy and Learning."** We ask writers to consider ways to connect literacy with learning goals across disciplines. How can literacy serve as a bridge between students' experiences in the ELA classroom and their broader educational journeys? How can teachers help students apply literacy and language skills in meaningful, interdisciplinary ways? Ultimately, how can students use language and literacy to enhance their understanding in various subjects and in their personal lives, and how can teachers leverage these connections to foster deeper, more inclusive learning experiences?

We seek research and practitioner-oriented pieces (~1000–3000 words), personal essays (~1000+ words), and original poetry related to this issue's theme and geared towards an audience of P-12 and postsecondary English Language Arts educators. Please note that word limits are suggestions and not fixed requirements. We welcome single and co-authored submissions from both veteran and early-career teachers, and we especially invite new writers, pre-service teachers, and graduate students to develop submissions. Writers are encouraged to access past issues at <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/> to review successful submissions. We invite you to respond to the theme **"Bridging Literacy and Learning"** by considering such questions as:

- How can we help students see the connections between literacy and learning in other subjects? How can teachers promote these interdisciplinary links to deepen understanding across the curriculum and/or beyond the classroom?
- How can highlighting interdisciplinary connections enhance the relevance of English Language Arts for our students, particularly for those who may not see themselves reflected in the curriculum or whose future aspirations lie outside ELA?
- What do literacy and learning across the disciplines mean in light of the rapidly evolving context of AI tools for both teachers and students? What in-school and out-of-school literacies will students need in a future in which AI plays a growing part?
- How can schools, school leaders, and educators collaborate to highlight the importance of literacy across all subjects?

Submissions will be accepted until **Tuesday, February 11, 2025**, via <**https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/**>. All submissions will be reviewed through a double-blind process by multiple peer reviewers. Submissions should not have been previously published or be under review elsewhere. Manuscripts should follow current APA guidelines for citations. All writing should appear in Times New Roman 12 pt. font, and authors' names and identifying information must be removed from all submissions. Send any queries to <**njenglishjournal@gmail.com**>.

bell hooks: "As we think and write about visual art, as we make spaces for dialogue across boundaries, we engage a process of cultural transformation that will ultimately create a revolution in vision."

NJCTE

2025 Spring Conference

Call for Proposals

Visual Literacy: Curricular Relevance for Modern Students

Thursday, March 20, 2025 at TCNJ

Every day students are bombarded with visual texts. Images, billboards, social media posts, reels, videos, emojis, animations, films. What role can and should these texts play in K-12 ELA classrooms? NJCTE's spring conference will explore how and why teachers integrate visual texts into their instruction as well as their impact on student engagement, the development of student reading and writing, and their relevance for 21st century readers and writers.

Please consider sharing your experiences and expertise by submitting a proposal via this Google Form by Friday, December 13, 2024. Proposals for interactive, participatory 45-minute sessions that answer the following questions are encouraged:

- **How are you incorporating visual artifacts into your instruction (pictures, photographs, artwork, infographics)?**
- **In what ways can teachers meet the NJ ELA standards by including visual literacy into their teaching?**
- **What role can visual assessment play in K-12 classrooms?**
- **When working with students with differing abilities, what are the benefits and challenges of using visual texts?**
- **How can visual text enhance learning outcomes for students with learning disabilities?**
- **How can visuals inspire teachers and students to want to learn more about a text or topic?**
- **How does the science of reading attend (or not) to visual literacy instruction?**
- **What criteria do teachers need to consider when selecting visual texts?**
- **How can visual literacy enhance curricular cultural relevance?**
- **What writing and compositional opportunities do visual texts make possible?**
- **How might teachers use visual texts to build students' interest in informational text?**
- **What should teachers consider when designing visual texts for classroom use?**

"We don't see things as they are. We see them as we are." Anais Nin

"The question is not what you look at, but what you see." Henry David Thoreau

NJCTE Writing Contest 2024

Style Criteria **Poetry (50-line max.)**
Short Story (5-page max., double-spaced)
Personal essay (5-page max., double-spaced)
MUST RESPOND TO PROMPT

Writing from the heart, with hope to empower humanity

Essay Prompt

The NCTE theme of "Heart, Hope, Humanity" connects the lives of youth with leadership. A leader impacts hearts by providing hope, inspiring humanity, and galvanizing student thinking.

Consider how leadership —personal, private, or within society— affects you as a young person. How do leaders gain and maintain power? Do we necessarily relinquish power when we appoint leaders? Does leadership flourish more through shared wisdom and community? What do you think your generation might do better than those who came before it did? What and who do you think has helped form your beliefs about our society and your role in it?

Write a short story, poem or essay that emanates from your heart, evinces hope, and meditates on humanity as a high school student in 2024.

NJCTE is a professional organization committed to applying the power of language and literacy to pursue justice and equity for the students and teachers of New Jersey. NJCTE is the New Jersey affiliate organization of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)

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2. Teachers may submit up to ten entries for their students in each genre. Surplus entries will be disqualified.
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Deadline 1-10-25

Essay

SCAN ME

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Poetry

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It Was Our Classroom

ADELE BRUNI ASHLEY
Teachers College

When I was in second grade, I had a teacher who was known as a bit of a maverick. Every other second-grade classroom at our elementary school sat in rows and spent their days neatly, dutifully completing worksheets in preparation for our standardized tests. I could see one of those other classrooms across the courtyard each morning from my perch on the windowsill where I was completing my own worksheets on a clipboard. Some of my classmates had their clipboards and were curled up in our puppet theater, a refrigerator box in the corner of the room. Others were sitting at desks. Our teacher told us that we too had to do those worksheets each morning and to do them well. But in the afternoons, we took a trip to Kenya, boarding a plane in the school gym and then "flying" back to our transformed classroom. We pored through the *World Book Encyclopedia* (this was in the 1980s) searching for information about the word or phrase our teacher would post daily to spark our inquiry. We wrote stories and plays and shared them with one another in messy performances. I can still feel over 30 years later the absorbing, intense joy of that second-grade classroom. Yet we completed those worksheets, took the standardized tests, and somehow those practices didn't sap our joy. They amplified it.

How did our teacher do it? I remember being excited when he distributed those worksheets; he framed the whole enterprise as a kind of game. We were up against a force beyond all of us and while we would do what others deemed important, we would do it our way. As a seven-year-old, I didn't know who was behind those worksheets and those tests. What was important, though, was that our teacher was part of the "we"; he was on our side as we faced those expectations. We had a sense that we were pushing back together to preserve our classroom. This was critical, too—it was *our* classroom. He created openings for us to make choices: where to be physically, what to read at times, what to write. Those openings offered us ownership.

Years later, as a secondary ELA teacher myself, I found that things were quite different; we didn't have as much time together as we had in that second-grade classroom, and we couldn't necessarily rearrange the physical space. The stakes of those standardized tests were often higher. But there were some elements of that second-grade experience from which I continued to draw. I attempted to position myself as a coach alongside my students, acknowledging that we are all up against the same demands and were all on the same side. I reminded students that those standardized tests were externally generated, and we worked to determine what content and skills those tests valued. We discussed the extent to which those values exemplified on a given standardized test aligned with our own; this test may be what others believe English to be, but what do *we* believe is most essential to the teaching of English? How would *we* evaluate the work of our class if given the option? These were questions we took up together.

I have a three-year-old son who loves to hear books aloud, and often it's the same book on repeat. Lately, that book has been

Dr. Seuss's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* So I've been thinking about the Grinch and his assumption that the joy in *Who*-ville resides in the trappings of Christmas—the presents, the decorations, the food. As a teacher, I assume sometimes that the joy in my classroom is similarly contained, that it lives in specific assignments (that multigenre project!) or lessons (acting out scenes from *A Raisin in the Sun*!). But I'm beginning to understand that it's bigger than that, this joy.

My second-grade teacher was cultivating joy and collective classroom ownership by building relationships. When pushing back against school policy, he was forging those bonds by demarcating "us" versus "them." Within our classroom, he was encouraging us to work together on small group tasks. When we worked individually, he was urging us to offer that work to the class as a whole—to tell our classmates about that whale book we were reading on our own or to share the picture we had been sketching of an igloo. That sharing was never evaluative; we were never asked to critique or praise our classmates' work. We were asked to engage, to talk about what their work made us think and feel. We were weaving connections by gifting to one another our individual thinking.

Over the past several years, I've stepped out of the ELA classroom as I teach secondary ELA teachers, and we all grapple with what it means to be an educator right now. My students struggle to decide what texts they can teach and what kinds of conversations they can initiate. Some of my students chafe against the demands their school contexts and both the overt and subtle ways those schools stifle teaching and learning. But even as they venture into the fraught, complex realities of our current educational landscape, my students are determined to create their own joy-filled classrooms. They're designing classroom environments in which students can make meaningful choices about what and how they learn. They're crafting projects through which their secondary students collaborate with purpose both within and outside the classroom. They're standing at the classroom door to greet their students individually, and they're pausing as they circulate to check homework to ask about a recent school basketball game. They're centering relationships with their students and among their students.

We may not be the *Whos* in our ELA classrooms, holding hands in a circle and singing. Our joy as students and teachers, however, has the same source: It emerges from and is sustained by our connectedness.

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Writing Horror: Culturally Responsive Genre Literacy

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"The mother is upstairs with a cord, a saw, a garbage bag, a black light, and some cleaning supplies." This suggestive line occurs early on in a 1500-word horror story by an 8th grader, who goes on to imagine a series of gruesome deaths in an otherwise ordinary suburban neighborhood. Encouraging students to share their deep knowledge of horror video shorts unlocked a well of creativity in my 8th grade English Language Arts class in a northeastern city. This case study of horror writing explores how student-led culturally responsive genre discovery can connect to existing curricular mandates, affirm student knowledge, and allow for sustained and engaged student work through co-constructed learning that draws on and cultivates the joys of shared fandom.

Creating culturally responsive or relevant pedagogy implicates literacy and literary genres, both in what we allow into the classroom and what we keep out. Classroom texts that help students perceive other cultures and allow them to see themselves are a fundamental part of a culturally responsive literacy classroom (Sims Bishop 1990). A long-standing body of literature affirms the importance and effectiveness of giving students access to diverse texts (Ebe 2010; Tan and Ma 2021). Culturally responsive or relevant pedagogy refers to the entire classroom environment and approach (Ladson-Billings 1995) and has been shown to improve school outcomes in the United States for historically marginalized non-White or low-income students (Cherfas 2021; Dee and Penner 2021; Yu 2022). But finding and igniting interest for students can require moving outside traditional texts and genres. Culturally responsive genre literacy offers a new way of thinking about connecting with students who did not see their out-of-school literacy interests and obsessions reflected in their classrooms.

Recognizing genre in fandoms can be a way to expand texts and voices in the ELA classroom. Genre literacy has also been conceptualized through bringing in texts that are part of fandoms and analyzing fandom culture in the classroom (Jones and Storm 2022, 2023). Fandoms, write Jones and Storm, "are often places that center joy as fans of focal texts share passionate intensities, discuss the text's aesthetic properties, dream up new stories, write themselves into existence, and even shift shared imaginaries" (2023, 2). Even with texts by diverse authors, students may not see their voices and passions reflected in the traditional English classroom, with its focus on academic responses to prescribed texts. Students encounter and transform texts outside the classroom in their fandom communities, however, which offer opportunities for joyful teaching and learning in shared exploration.

Horror, in particular, is a genre that is touched on in school mainly through the works of Poe and in complex literary fiction such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Works devoted to the supernatural and terrifying are everywhere in student's lives—in popular films, comics, and shared oral traditions—and have devoted online fandoms. Moreover, Black horror in film and stories is increasingly seen as a reclaiming of Black American history and experience. As Gabrielle Bellot wrote in

2019 in *The New York Times* about the current cultural prominence of Black horror movies by practitioners such Jordan Peele, "horror is, after all, a safe way to experience our deepest fears without actually having to confront them.... We have the luxury of turning away, of closing our eyes." At the same time, Black horror "seeks to capture the all-too-real fear of walking through America in a Black body and, with ghosts and clones and body-swapping conspiracies, it becomes an intentionally exaggerated, baroque realism" (Bellot 2019). The stories generated in our classroom featured beheadings, blood, and betrayals, fantastical exaggerations of experiences and emotions that are both culturally specific and redolent of adolescence in general. At the same time, since the writers themselves are in control of the narrative, Black and brown youth can experience both mastery of text and of history, writing out of existence the undying "vampires" of racism (Love 2019) and outmoded horror tropes such as Black characters dying first (Corbitt 2023).

Following student insight and genre interests, we discovered joy, curiosity, and shared scholarship through connecting the genre of YouTube horror shorts to the tradition of 19th-century Gothic horror. For context, this case study focuses on students in a "basic skills" class, in which students are reading below grade level, according to district screening tests, yet show passionate and involved reading and writing habits outside these tests. In a unit focused on the appeal of suspense in narrative, students read mysteries and short stories by Edgar Allan Poe and completed literary analyses. While all the students were BIPOC, they did not explicitly address race but created characters who were either like themselves, their families, and their friends in their narratives or were drawn from other fandoms such as anime and *Avatar*. They wrote detailed fictions about school intruders, white vans and haunted houses, and parents and children facing monsters and demons at home and in forests. This paper documents a process for unearthing student genre interest outside stereotypes or pre-existing cultural associations through four guiding principles.

Principle 1: Engage in Constant Youth Ethnography

Be watchful for and encourage student enthusiasm and interest as it bubbles up in relation to existing curriculum.

When I asked what features of horror and suspense students already knew, one student jumped up to ask if they could load a scary video on our classroom monitor. We agreed, as long as it was classroom-appropriate and did not feature body horror. This student's desire to share ignited our "scary story" unit. Other students asked to share their favorite scary shorts. We then collaboratively generated principles of suspenseful stories based on YouTube horror shorts. Students established the following genre and setting features: "A: Night, alone, weird empty space, squeaks and creaks, limited sight of main character OR B: Day, rules that no one can understand, danger if rules are broken." Students then composed their own stories following these features in a process of "restorying" Poe and YouTube horror shorts (Thomas and Stornaiuolo 2016). I had been alert to the possibility that scary stories might be generative already, however, as I had observed prior students' obsessions with Internet horror shorts, as they surfed their Chromebooks in between classes. Teachers can also formalize this inquiry by asking students to share web, TV, or movie series that they are fans of and unpack together both the meaning of the series and of fandom itself, similar to the "equity trail" procedure articulated by Jones and Storm,

designed to "harness joy and social justice" (2023, 3-4).

Principle 2: Enlist Norm Checkers

These co-ethnographers are often closer in age to students but can be anyone who is embedded in a sub-culture and aware of genre norms.

I was also made aware of the popularity of horror films through two emic observers, my own adolescent children, one of whom had previously shared with me his enthusiasm for YouTube horror shorts. The genre of horror shorts on YouTube and other social channels has several sub-genres as well, according to my co-ethnographer. These include analog horror, which is based on the found footage premise pioneered by the *Blair Witch Project* (1999), and creepypasta, a two-decade-old genre of short, first-person, paranormal Internet stories often shared a low, deadpan voice. While not every teacher has convenient adolescent norm-checkers at home, we do have colleagues and friends; one colleague is a devoted gamer, for instance, and I check in with them on video games students are experiencing as texts outside of school. In addition, once students are aware of teacher openness to expanded genres, students often volunteer their fandoms to offer potential whole-class activities and choices. After our first scary story unit, one student, for instance, introduced me to the vibrant online community of My Little Pony horror, featuring grotesque renderings and infections of the animated ponies. While some fandoms are not youth-appropriate, shared student-chosen genres tend to be within classroom norms, and teachers can articulate boundaries in the co-curation of classroom genres.

Principle 3: Social Media Scan

Look for trends and genres that might bubble up in or connect to the existing curriculum.

Social media such as YouTube and TikTok are valuable data sources, especially as both deliver genre-content similar to the user's initial search, becoming more focused on the same genre the more the user browses that particular content. After skimming just three "creepypasta" videos on YouTube, for example, more started to populate my YouTube homepage. This not only helps keep teachers alert to student interests but also helps make them aware of student language usage. For instance, the subgenre of the "school interview" on TikTok consists of students asking others rapid-fire questions, sometimes of a personal nature, as if in a "man on the street" interview. It has genre-cousins in the hypothetical question or "would you rather" TikToks. These all could be effective genre pairings with more traditional classroom studies of ethics, journalism, or, within fiction, character conflict and dilemmas.

Principle 4: Ensure Students Recognize and Honor Student Genre Passions and Work, With Opportunities for Celebration.

After we generated our principles of horror and suspense through watching YouTube shorts, students created their own stories. Some asked to work in pairs, and several decided spontaneously to illustrate their stories, which featured some grisly scenes but followed classroom guidelines for fiction, in that no real names were used and sensitive plotlines such as self-harm or school shootings were avoided; they had enough inventive material without that. All students in this class wrote their horror stories within the originally scheduled time as well, something that occurred with no other assignment over the marking period. I printed each student's story, and they made

book covers and stapled or sewed the book binding. Students could choose whether they wanted their book displayed in the school hallway, which they all chose to do.

Through engaging in ongoing youth ethnographic research, recruiting norm checkers or emic participants for information, using social media as a data source, and celebrating student fandoms and genre knowledge, teachers are better prepared to understand, respond to, and even propose new classroom genres for students to explore and connect to the existing curriculum. Horror shorts on YouTube helped reinforce and extend ideas of suspense and Gothic horror from our Poe study and engaged students so thoroughly that they not only completed the assignment but were critical to developing it. In the end-of-marking-period survey, five of fourteen students wrote that of all their work, the scary story was the work that they were proud of and that they would like to write more. Alertness to culture outside our classrooms can help us be responsive when students allude to it through their own interests, enthusiasms, and desire to transform or escape their worlds with heightened imaginations.

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Finding Joy through Vulnerability in the English Classroom

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There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.
– Leonard Cohen

In the past few years, moments of joy in the English language arts classrooms have felt tragically few and far between. Too often, in fact, these moments of joy feel like interruptions to the official curriculum and "real" work of the classroom: learning to skillfully read, write and speak the approved curriculum. The unexpected moments when we have a laugh with our students, when we pause to connect with their pain, when we put the curriculum aside to help our students feel seen—these are the cracks in our teaching that let the light in. As we—two English teachers and an English educator—reflected on moments of joy in our classrooms, we realized that our most joyful moments tend to occur outside of the "expected." They surfaced in moments of vulnerability and authentic human connection, when we showed students our humanness and let them show us theirs.

When Emily invited Darlene and Kayla, her former English education students, to reflect on their experiences with joy in their secondary English classrooms, we found commonality in their experiences with joy and vulnerability. While we expected to identify joy in moments of high engagement or students' success, we instead found joy in moments where we let down our guard and provided space for vulnerability. We resonated with the words of Gholdy Muhammad, who writes, "Joy is fun and celebratory, yet it…is also the embodiment of, learning of, and practice of self and humanity, and care for and help for humanity and the earth" (70). In what follows, we look inside Darlene's and Emily's classrooms to see how joy emerged from vulnerability, echoing Brené Brown's notion that vulnerability and joy are inextricably linked. We conclude with thoughts about how we might prepare English teachers to allow vulnerability in their teaching so that these rarer moments of joy, these "cracks" in our lessons, become the norm rather than the exception.

Teaching to Heal: Navigating Pain to Reclaim Joy

I was a few weeks shy of completing my student teaching experience. I had been assigned to a school in an affluent, predominately white district. However, I was fortunate in that my classes were some of the most racially and socioeconomically diverse in the entire school. My Latinx identity—something that I'd long been taught to suppress in most academic contexts—suddenly gave me an unforeseen advantage in the classroom. Not only did I feel comfortable engaging in difficult

conversations about race and discrimination, but my experiences growing up with immigrant parents allowed me to connect more easily with my first- and second-generation students, including one student named Rahim (pseudonym). Rahim is a first-generation Nigerian American student who instantly bonded with me. Our relationship developed through the exchange of stories about our respective upbringings in non-white, immigrant households, including our difficulties publicly "claiming" our respective cultural identities and our reflex to "code-switch" in predominately white spaces. However, I never shared these stories with the entire class; rather, they were strictly reserved for one-on-one interactions. My reluctance to incorporate more of myself into the classroom would come to haunt me weeks later when Rahim, in a moment of vulnerability, uttered the words “my brother died.”

The revelation, in which Rahim revealed that he'd intentionally kept his brother's death a secret, prompted me to reflect on my own teaching practices. Up until that moment, I had been happy with my teaching: I created units that were connected to critical social issues, centered around diverse texts, and that encouraged critical dialogue. I had done everything necessary to cultivate a safe, culturally responsive classroom environment. Yet, here was a student who not only suffered an immense personal loss, but who chose to process that loss alone. Like his Nigerian identity, he felt safer keeping parts of his humanity—his suffering—hidden. Even with all of my “classroom successes,” Rahim’s confession threw all the brokenness around me into sharp relief.

For days afterward, I felt lost. What could I, as an English teacher, do to help my students heal? How could I help them create a pathway toward joy? Then, it hit me: the answer was in the content. Specifically, I needed to draw on the emotional core of the content to let more of "me" and my students into the classroom. Incorporating more of myself into the content would bridge the psychic chasm that existed between me and students like Rahim. By incorporating instruction that was grounded in vulnerability, we could move toward a culture of joy.

I discarded everything I had planned for those final weeks and started from scratch. I began sharing stories about my life and my family to help contextualize and humanize the content I was teaching. For instance, a text depicting linguicism became an opportunity to share stories about my family’s reluctance to speak Spanish in public. My white students—many of whom had been reluctant to talk about race in previous weeks—began speaking more candidly about their emotional responses to the content. My students of color began sharing snippets of their personal lives. Even Rahim, who often avoided sharing personal details about his life in front of his classmates, began opening up. He now felt comfortable talking about his Nigerian heritage, his struggles with reconciling his dual identities, and his experiences as a Black teen in America. A small, imperceptible "crack" had formed in his emotional armor—one that allowed joy to flow in.

In the year since I student taught, Rahim and I have stayed in contact. Recently, he caught me up on all the latest details of his life, including a student cultural event he helped organize. He directed me to a thirty-second video of the event: a throng of students dancing to Caribbean music against a backdrop of various national flags. Among the sea of colored fabric, I noticed the familiar colors of the Nigerian flag. The image prompted me to ask Rahim why he decided to help organize the event. He

explained that, as a Black person in an affluent district, he's always felt like an outsider. Opening up—allowing himself to be vulnerable in front of his white peers—would destroy the image of the assimilated, first-generation American he worked so hard to curate. "Then you came, and you were so open and real with us…. It changed me."

Listening to his words, I realized something. The practice of storytelling allowed my students to harness a fundamental aspect of their humanity: their capacity for vulnerability. Giving students permission to express vulnerability in the classroom is an act of empowerment—an act that helps create space for connection, healing, and joy.

Fostering Collective Joy by Centering Vulnerability

In my teacher preparation program, we learned all about how to get students engaged in the content. We focused heavily on how to incorporate high interest topics and culturally responsive lessons. Despite all attempts to foster an inclusive and joyful learning environment, my students were uncomfortable interacting with one another. On paper, I was doing everything right. I was creating lessons where students could see themselves in the readings. I was making space for getting-to-know-you activities, free writes, and high-interest debates. In spite of my efforts, the students and the environment lacked enthusiasm. There were small glimpses of enthusiasm at the beginning of class when I allowed the students to partake in five-minute debates on topics of their choosing. While the students were interested in the debate topics, once the five minutes were up, they went back into their shells.

As a first year teacher, I was feeling immensely discouraged. I spent the first two months of the school year doing everything I could to cultivate enthusiasm and engagement with my students. I was about ready to give up when an unexpected source of joy emerged organically in my classroom.

On this particular day the debate topic was: "Nature versus Nurture," and the debate morphed into a heated discussion regarding whether all serial killers are sociopaths.

Since completing a murder mystery assignment focused on using textual evidence to best support a claim, the students showed a certain proclivity toward discussing serial killers. The students yelled back and forth with oddly specific facts about mental illness and serial killers. It was clear that this was a topic of high interest for the class.

With one minute left, the students reached a stalemate. They presented all of the facts and ideas they could come up with, so they turned to me to ask, "Ms. S., can you Google it for us? Has every serial killer been diagnosed as a sociopath or psychopath?"

"Be careful," Ms. S., "administration will flag your search history like they do to us! Search it on your phone, just in case!"

As I pressed enter on my Google search, a loud alarm sounded. I looked at my students in confusion and they stared back quizzically. They began laughing hysterically as they realized that the alarm belonged to the 5-minute timer I set at the beginning of each debate.

"You should see your face right now, Ms. S. It looks like you saw a ghost."

Rather than trying to play off this moment and maintain my "authority," I let out the biggest belly laugh.

The genuine laughter and enjoyment that the students obtained from this moment was a "crack" that allowed joy and light into our classroom through an unexpected moment of genuine human connection. This interaction broke the ice in our classroom. Following this moment, I saw my students blossom as they felt more connected to me

as a human being. Rather than feeling intimidated or disconnected from me, in this moment the students saw me as someone who had the same emotions as them. It was my vulnerability that allowed the students to open up and experience true joy in my classroom. While I did not plan for this moment, I did not shut it down and allowed all of us to soak in the moment. I realize, now, how important it is to give space to these moments of connection and allow myself to be vulnerable with my students. Following this moment, my attitude and demeanor in my classroom were forever altered. Rather than maintaining a hard exterior, I softened and allowed my students to see me as a human being first and a teacher second. The students followed suit and began to open up both to me and to each other. The true source of joy within a classroom is a teacher's willingness to show their humanity to their students.

Teaching With Vulnerability

As we reflect on these moments of our teaching, we are keenly aware of the need to be human and vulnerable with our students and allow our students to do the same. As our vignettes illustrate, our moments of vulnerability led to moments of joy through authentic connection. English language arts classrooms that nurture all aspects of our humanness—not just the academic ones—seem more likely to create these moments.

As an English educator, Emily is left wondering about the implications of our reflections on how she prepares English teachers. For years, she has prepared her teacher candidates to design engaging, accessible, and inclusive curricula. This has included instruction in learner-centered, high-impact, high-interest, and anti-racist pedagogies. She has also stressed and modeled the importance of relationships with students. These reflections underscore the need to integrate these priorities in the curricula, designing lessons that center emotional connection and support vulnerability in engaging with the curricula. For some teachers, this might feel counter-cultural, as vulnerability is often associated with weakness rather than confidence. However, our reflections suggest that these moments of vulnerability create both connection and engagement with students, nudging us towards curricula and pedagogy that nurture and savor moments of vulnerability. Emily is eager to take on this challenge, beginning with reflection on the ways in which she models vulnerability in her own teaching.

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Healing Through Expressive Writing

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On a hot spring day, a group of students—as well as teachers, administrators, and community members—sat outside on the front lawn of Asbury Park High School (APHS) in a giant U-shape. Paper tablecloths flapped in the wind, held to the tables by packages of cookies and water bottles. The creative writing teacher, Christine DeMarsico, checked the microphone for sound. Jennifer Chauhan, executive director of Project Write Now (PWN), a local literary arts nonprofit, held the printed anthologies, titled *Let Us Share*, like trophies as the students found their seats for the Writers Celebration. Meredith Z. Avakian, a spoken word artist and instructor, had spent the past year inspiring the 22 students in grades 9 through 12 to put pen to paper. The weekly class had become a sacred space in which each student was heard and respected; they poured their hearts into their notebooks and then polished their writing for publication.

A young man, J., volunteered to read his story first. Christine and the other students knew the intimate details; the class had become a family, and the sharing of words throughout the year strengthened their bond. Christine held J.'s hand as he read "The Story of Us," tears welling in his eyes, about the tragic day his sister died.

> *My world turned upside down after all of the hell that happened that very day, and I still can't get over that day. … The only way I now see her is through a photo on top of our counter. … M., I wish you were here to meet your little brother and get to hang out with him. Thank you for the memories, and for the good times, and I hope to see you again sometime.*

After he finished, Christine gave him a hug as the entire class erupted in applause. You could feel the love for J. permeating the space. Storytelling releases trauma; it creates a safe space for healing (Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999). And in these moments, it even brings joy. Joy and gratitude for our shared humanity—our genuine connections with one another.

Three years earlier in the fall of 2020, Christine had welcomed Project Write Now into her classroom. PWN was founded by Jennifer, a former high school English teacher, who was dealing with her own trauma after the loss of her parents and subsequent divorce. She wanted to give young people supportive spaces to explore their authentic selves through writing and sharing their stories. Christine had been participating in PWN's teacher writing group and immediately said yes when Jennifer suggested they co-create the Spoken Word Project for Christine's creative writing class. They both recognized the heightened anxiety and stress students were navigating due to the pandemic and the increased racial tension in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Each week over Zoom, Christine and Jennifer guided students to write how they were feeling that day; they also invited spoken word artists to join them, to perform for the students and share their inspirations for writing. One by

one, students began reading their words aloud, and a flood of thumbs-up and heart emojis appeared in the tiny black screens. At the end of class, students dropped their favorite lines they wrote into the chat and PWN's instructors wove them together into collaborative poems. For example, from "If I Ruled the World":

If I ruled the world
I'd stop world hunger
No shortages of food
We'd all be in a good mood
I would make everyone smile
And change the world
To a better place
For every color of face
In this one human race

Students were expressing their emotions—their fears, their hopes, their dreams. And in these shared experiences, they were feeling less alone. In a 2021 survey of the creative writing class conducted by PWN, 70 percent of students said that writing and sharing with the group made them feel more connected to one another. Eighty-three percent said they were likely to use writing when working through strong emotions. One student shared: "I noticed that now I can make myself feel relaxed from stressful things. I can feel my mental health improving."

English classes need to be authentic and healing spaces to transform education in this post-pandemic reality where anxiety, stress, and depression are hurting our kids. According to a recent report by YouthTruth, "depression, stress, and anxiety are the most prevalent obstacles to learning for secondary students at every grade level for six through twelve."*(*YouthTruth, 2023) How can we educate our children when they are living in a society where they can no longer be kids, are not given a voice, and are succumbing to unrealistic pressures and expectations?

Expressive writing must be at the heart of this change because writing is a means for healing and growth. Words are powerful—they create connections, love, empathy, and understanding (Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999). The partnership between Project Write Now and the creative writing class at APHS started during the pandemic when it seemed impossible to keep students engaged in teaching and learning as traditionally done. This partnership opened the door for healing and restoration during the most challenging of times.

To this day, Christine begins her class with a check-in question, followed by a writing prompt. Most days, she uses poems (poets.org is a fantastic resource), asking students to pull a line, a phrase, an idea, or an emotion and to write from it. She also uses thought-provoking questions. The prompts range from light and funny to deep and introspective. One day the question was "What is on your never to-do list?" The students engaged in a lively discussion about skydiving, snakes, and flying. Each question breaks the barrier between students and helps the group develop a bond. As September moves to January, the students become more deeply connected. The mutual respect and love invite soul growth and joy. As the school year progresses, students are empowered to learn in a safe space—to be heard, respected, and loved. If we don't see and accept our students for who they are, we cannot teach them. Expressive writing is the bridge to this transformational education.

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Hamlet and Happiness: How Changing Curriculum Brought Back Joy

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"We are going to have to cut *Hamlet*," Colleen said.

This decision had not come easily. Rather, during this phase of curriculum revision, we had already read or reviewed close to 75 texts in the hopes of finding the high school English holy grail - a book that the students *could* possibly and authentically enjoy. Desperately reading every list we could find, ranging from the more established *New York Times* best sellers to *Buzzfeed*'s lists of new YA novels, we had already spent months reading on our own, sharing the ones we thought had potential, and adding to an ever-growing list.

But that was not enough.

Having already scrapped Dante's *Inferno* and Camus's *The Stranger*, the last juggernaut on our list was Shakespeare. To cut him or not to cut him; that was now the question sitting on the kitchen table.

We knew that *Hamlet* was good. We knew that we had honed our craft and could make connections to popular culture and *The Lion King* that would make our seniors a little more amenable to the dense rhetoric and traumatic content. However, that was the significant issue. We needed to do the work to grab their attention, to make it likable. We faced as teachers the Sisyphean task of walking into our classes each and every day and convincing our students that this was something that they *should* like and enjoy.

And that was before we could get them to even work with the text, to conquer the standards and beyond, to encourage critical thinking and help guide them to analysis, synthesis, and sophisticated work.

We knew that what we loved about the text would become secondary to the exhaustion we would face creating lesson plans and trying to light the fire in our students. We knew that there would be joy in those brief moments that sparked when a student felt accomplished for understanding a passage, but these would be hard earned.

It was too much. It was not enough.

We knew that in order to get our students to be lifelong readers, we needed to first get them to see that reading could be something joyful. And we knew that our answer lay in contemporary texts, and, even scarier, just letting the students pick books that they wanted to read. We knew this because this is what reading has looked like in our lifetimes. As voracious readers, we know that the real joy of reading comes from finding one's fit.

This was terrifying. Our worries were many.

The shift from thinking about text to thinking about standards and skills was our first hurdle. No one wants to be the teacher who abandons the canon for so many reasons. In the twenty-first century—the canon is seen as "safe." Despite the "heartaches and the thousand natural sorrows" that the classics have (and the trigger warnings for these texts are just as long and just as varied as their contemporary counterparts), they are relatively free from the "slings and arrows" of popular opinion (please forgive the *Hamlet* references - he is gone, but not forgotten). Additionally, to

replace one of these canonical texts with something popular or contemporary is often seen as being easy. Suddenly when it is no longer a Ye Olde text, we are seen as not doing the *hard* work and comments arise that we might as well be teaching TikTok. Meanwhile, we knew we would be making resources for texts for which none are available—further reminding us that what we were doing was out of the ordinary.

Recognizing that most of our work could be done regardless of the selected text was freeing. While we still start the year reading together, our curriculum of modern memoirs and contemporary dystopias seems to sit better with our twenty-first century students. Rather than fighting for them to see the relevance of the text, it is apparent from the covers, which enables us to shift the focus from getting them to do the reading to teaching them how to do it. It is during this time that we lay the groundwork —moving our classes through the standards and establishing expectations. Through regular book chats, seminars, synthesis activities, and guided reading questions during both whole class selections and smaller group readings, we demonstrate the practices necessary for vigorous reading. By first doing this as a full class, but then allowing the students to practice these activities on a smaller scale, we prepare them for their future as independent readers.

And so the countdown to January—the time of the year when we start independent reading—begins early. Students start making TBR lists. The overwrought honors students can imagine a time when they will be able to read *for fun* for the first time in years, because having to do it *for English* makes it possible for them to carve out the time in their schedules.

Although many of them (and I) would love it if all we did was read independently for months, reading is only one of the standards that we need to focus on as English teachers. Throughout the second semester, our students are first engaged in a research-focused unit and then in a capstone, project-based learning, unit. These focus heavily on nonfiction and writing, so it is within these units that the class is also participating in their independent reading, both inside and outside of the classroom. Every week, and almost every class, has time carved out for independent reading because we know that if they see us putting value on it, and engaging in it ourselves, they will understand that we believe it is important. As their work becomes more self-directed, they are able to decide what days they read in the room and what days they do not. More often than not, the rooms are full of reading. Regular conferences, smaller standards-based assignments, and synthesizing tasks are used to assess their reading while also encouraging the students to not only make connections across texts, but also to be inspired for their next book. It is not uncommon for one book to make its way from the bookshelf to multiple readers before it is put back, with pockets of discussions happening through each exchange.

Listening to a student giggle over the expletives and potatoes of *The Martian* or passing the Taylor Jenkins Reids and Colleen Hoovers around excitedly or even enthusiastically swapping books when one doesn't fit—happy in the knowledge that they do not have to complete the book if they didn't want to (really, who would choose Dante's *Inferno*? e can't say I didn't warn him)—are moments when joy re-enters the classroom. It is in the quiet hum that happens when they read silently and the passionate recommendations that occur when another student overhears a book chat. And it is this joy that enables the students to ease into the rigor.

I did not become an English teacher to teach Shakespeare (as much as I do enjoy

him). One of the many reasons I did is because one of my greatest joys is reading—cracking the spine on a new book and falling deeper into a story. Seeing my students enabled to do the same and hearing them when they realize that they can be readers if they find the right book reminds me why we do the work we do.

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“Joy and Pain” Strategies for Transformative Learning in the English Language Arts Curriculum

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As a child, I would visit my grandmother on Saturday mornings, when she would play the song “Joy and Pain” by Frankie Beverly and Maze in the kitchen while she cooked breakfast. The lyrics of the song “Joy and Pain” derive from a melodious composition by the renowned soul ensemble Maze, established by the talented Frankie Beverly in Philadelphia in the 1970s. The song "Joy and Pain" captures the complex nature of the duality of human existence reflective of historical struggles and triumphs experienced by the Black community, serving as a vessel for shared emotions and resilience.

Significantly, this song held a deep significance for my grandmother, and songs like these present in our kitchen on Saturday mornings transformed her home into the hallowed ground where joy and pain resonated harmoniously. In much the same way, storytelling holds great importance in Black spiritual traditions; my maternal grandmother bestowed upon us narratives echoing this inherent duality of joy intertwining with pain. Through playing a song, my grandmother nurtured a tenacity that I now perceive as an expression of joy as resistance. Black joy activists and theorists argue that Black joy is defined as the use of feelings of joy when the oppressive world doesn’t have room for your happiness and the ability to cultivate joy regardless of oppressive factors (Packnett, 2017).

Positionality

As a Black woman, scholar, mother, daughter, and teacher educator in English Language Arts (ELA), my work is deeply influenced by a commitment to foster healing and resilience through culturally responsive and healing-centered pedagogies. Throughout my career, I have taught at various educational levels, worked as a community organizer, and researched integrating culturally responsive teaching and healing-centered approaches to create inclusive and empowering learning environments. My experiences showed me the importance of incorporating healing into the classroom pedagogies and practices to impact student well-being and academic success.

Literature Review: Joy as Resistance in Educational Frameworks

Healing-centered pedagogies are educational approaches that prioritize the well-being and healing of students. These pedagogies go beyond trauma-sensitive methods and aim to create an environment that fosters emotional and mental healing. Integrating practices that promote joy, connection, and cultural responsiveness, healing-centered pedagogies seek to address the emotional needs of students. As a result, healing-centered practitioners hold space for the feelings of discomfort and trauma the curriculum may bring up (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Ginwright, 2015). While healing-centered approaches are starting to be commonly used by educators, there is little empirical or qualitative evidence on the

functions of these practices. In addition, even less studied is the role that joy as resistance plays in the effectiveness of delivering a healing-sensitive curriculum.

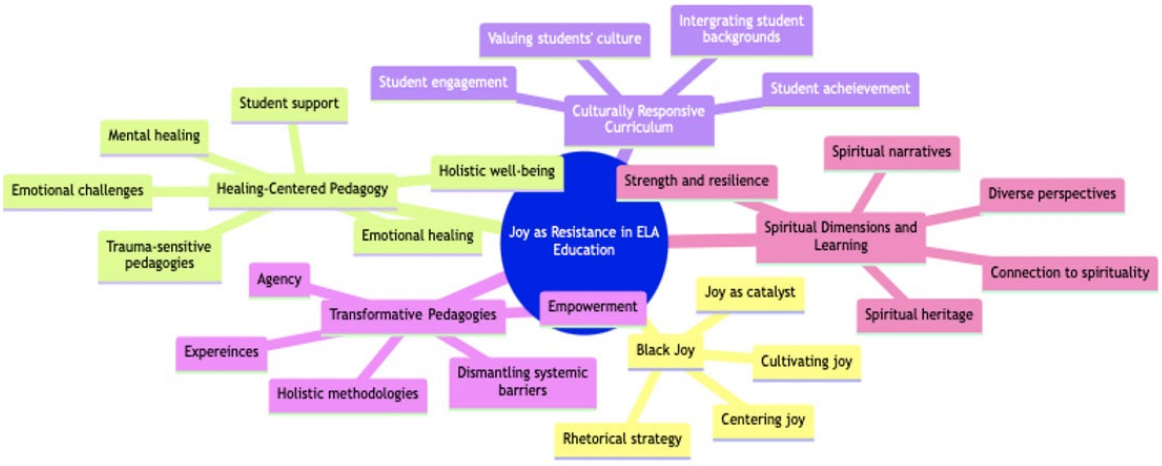
Newer research in a healing-centered curriculum focuses on joy as a rhetorical strategy for liberation and freedom called "joy as resistance" (Lu, 2019; Joy 2017). “Joy” in this context is used as a nonviolent communal approach to resisting the oppressive conditions of society. This fortitude takes on heightened significance within ELA instruction, where heterogeneous perspectives and tales constitute fundamental elements of a holistic and empowering syllabus. Embracing and comprehending these narratives not only enhances our educational terrain but also fosters a society that is more embracing and understanding. In English education, the ability to adapt and persevere assumes paramount significance. A comprehensive curriculum that empowers students necessitates the inclusion of a myriad of perspectives and narratives. By embracing and comprehending these diverse stories, we not only enhance our educational sphere but also cultivate an all-encompassing society characterized by empathy and inclusivity.

Furthermore, scholarly research emphasizes the crucial role of incorporating student cultures, communities, and diverse perspectives as a fundamental aspect of effective teaching (Gay, 2010). Culture-based pedagogies, advocating for a departure from traditional curriculum structures, have been found to be a significant factor in facilitating student achievement (Gay, 2010). The literature also underscores the need for educators to move beyond exposing students solely to instances of epistemic violence in society by incorporating social justice and trauma-informed contemplative practices (Kuyken et al., 2013; Lief, 2012). This is particularly relevant in K-12 classrooms, where a primarily white teaching force (NCES, 2019) grapples with the implementation and sustainability of culturally responsive practices, along with the challenge of maintaining an emancipatory curriculum in urban school districts (Borrero, Flores de la Cruz, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2017; Samuels, 2018). Consequently, the current academic discourse increasingly focuses on healing-centered education and practices within educational settings (Ginwright, 2015).

Framework for Joy as Resistance in ELA

In the ELA classroom, the concept of joy as resistance creates a powerful lens through which students can engage with literature, language, and the world around them. The framework is rooted in the idea that joy is not just an emotional state but also a tool for challenging narratives, fostering resilience, creating inclusive environments, and cultivating autonomy. The visual (Figure 1) illustrates how this framework can be operationalized in ELA instruction, including key strategies, outcomes, and theoretical underpinnings that support the integration of joy and resistance as a transformative process. The framework, which extends beyond the instructional techniques, incorporates healing-centered pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, transformative pedagogy, and spiritual dimensions of learning. It draws on the works of Gholdy Muhammad, bell hooks, and Cynthia Dillard to deepen the connection between joy, resistance, and educational practice in the fight against oppression in the cultivation of resilient students.

Figure 1.



The significance of joy in ELA is highlighted in Gholdy Muhammad's seminal work, *Unearthing Joy: A Guide to Culturally and Historically Responsive Teaching and Learning*, where she intricately explores how the cultivation of joy is a radical act of resistance within educational settings (2023). Muhammad underscores the significance of infusing joy into education, particularly for marginalized communities, as it empowers students to assert their identities, navigate challenges, and resist the constraints of oppressive structures that impede their intellectual and emotional growth (Muhammad, 2023).

Further enhancing this framework is the insights of bell hooks, as articulated in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. hooks advocates for the transformative potential of joy in the educational landscape, asserting that it disrupts traditional power dynamics in the classroom and creates a space where marginalized voices can be heard and validated. In the context of ELA, incorporating hooks' perspective reinforces that joy is not merely an emotional state but a deliberate and impactful form of resistance against prevailing educational norms, allowing for a more inclusive and empowering learning experience.

Cynthia Dillard's (2006) work in *On Spiritual Strivings: Transforming an African American Woman's Academic Life*, offers a perspective on how joy as resistance can be applied as a framework in the realm of ELA. Dillard explores the intersection of spirituality, identity, and academia with insights on how the idea of joyous resistance can live in educational settings (2006). The emphasis on spirituality as a source of strength and resilience draws from the long history of Black culture, where spirituality has been a central pillar of cultural identity and resistance. In the ELA classroom, this can be integrated by incorporating literature that explores diverse spiritual and cultural perspectives so that students can connect with their spiritual heritage and find joy in the exploration of these narratives. Additionally, Dillard's exploration of transformative learning experiences can inform ELA pedagogy to disrupt conventional norms and Eurocentric biases so that students feel liberated to express their unique voices and challenge dominant narratives (2006). The transformative learning Dillard advocates for features the

recognition and affirmation of students through text selection that integrates the emotional realities of students, discussions that acknowledge the spiritual aspects of humans, and texts that contribute joy as resistance by embracing the holistic nature of learning (2006).

Joy in Practice in ELA

Through an exploration of the framework, there are three different strategies that ELA teachers can easily apply to their teaching toolkit. First, incorporating culturally sensitive literature circles allows English teachers to incorporate joy as resistance into their instruction. Through the use of texts (Muhammad, 2023), educators can carefully select literature that reflects the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students. Intentional text selection allows students to express their identities, engage in conversations about diverse experiences, and collectively challenge the boundaries of traditional literary norms. By creating culturally sensitive literature circles, teachers create an inclusive environment that values the diversity of opinions in the classroom.

Based on bell hooks' (1994) innovative insights, English teachers can use creative expression as a pedagogical approach. By encouraging students to explore literature through a variety of creative media such as art, poetry, and drama, educators disrupt traditional power relationships and create fun and inclusive learning environments (hooks 1994). This approach is not only consistent with the idea that joy is a conscious form of resistance but also allows students to transcend the boundaries of traditional education. Through creative expression, students can enhance their interpretations of texts, share personal stories, and engage with literary themes in ways that closely fit their unique perspectives.

By incorporating Cynthia Dillard's (2006) perspective on spirituality as a source of resilience, English teachers can enrich their curriculum by integrating spiritual stories and personal testimonies. The inclusion of texts that explore different spiritual perspectives is consistent with Dillard's emphasis on recognizing the spiritual aspects of learning (2006). Additionally, providing a platform for students to share their testimonies, whether related to spirituality or personal growth, can be a joyful act of resistance. By filling the curriculum with stories that embrace the holistic nature of learning, educators actively participate in the framework of joy as resistance in ELA, creating an empathetic and understanding classroom community.

Sending You to Your Joy: Reflective Practice

In conclusion, joy as resistance in ELA can show a profound and transformative framework for educators and practitioners. Through each of the scholar's perspectives (hooks, 1994; Dillard, 2006; Muhammad, 2023), there is a deliberative centering and understanding of the impact of joy as an act of resistance against oppressive educational settings. Incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy, fostering transformative pedagogies, and recognizing the cultural spiritual dimensions of learning are strategies that educators can actively engage with in a joyful resistance that empowers students, amplifies diverse voices, and establishes inclusive learning environments. This framework challenges traditional education paradigms, through the centering of more holistic and inclusive methodologies. I believe this framework calls for educators to not only actively embrace diverse perspectives and celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity, but also provide students with an opportunity to connect with their narratives. The centering

of joy as resistance can transform the ELA curriculum into a catalyst for empowerment, agency, and transformative experiences.

I hope practitioners begin to recognize that joy is not just an emotional state but a dynamic force that disrupts traditional power dynamics, challenges exclusionary structures, and fosters resilience in the face of adversity. In weaving together, the insights of bell hooks, Gholdy Muhammad, and Cynthia Dillard and the broader framework of joy as resistance, educators will be better prepared to navigate and reshape the narratives in the ELA discipline. Through embracing this transformative approach, teachers will lay the foundation for an educational landscape that nurtures with the capacity to find joy even in the face of challenges, embodying the resilience and empowerment reflective of broader Black American experiences, as heard in those soulful Saturday mornings in my grandmother's kitchen to the tune of Maze.

Questions for Reflective Practice

1. How can I incorporate more culturally responsive texts into my curriculum that highlight the themes of joy and resistance into my curriculum?
2. In what ways can creative expression be used to help students explore and express joy as a form of resistance in their engagement with literature?
3. How can I create a classroom environment that celebrates and integrates students' experiences of joy and resistance in their spiritual or personal narratives?
4. What specific strategies can I implement to foster and highlight joy within my teaching?

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Teaching Writing: Fostering Joy in Writing Through "Commentarying"

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For the past 15 years, I have run an after-school education center specializing in reading and writing instruction for students of various age groups. Despite my role as an English writing teacher, I must confess that I secretly disliked teaching writing. My approach was often rigid, focused on perfection, and lacked the joy and creativity inherent in writing. This perspective shifted dramatically when I returned to graduate school. In a Rhetoric and Teaching course, I engaged in weekly commentary assignments on assigned readings. This process transformed my perception of writing and, consequently, the way I teach it. This transformation also positively affected my students' attitudes toward writing.

In my small private education center, serving about 60 students from kindergarten through 12th grade, I work as the education director overseeing three core subjects: sciences, math, and English. Additionally, I serve as a college consultant and teach standardized test preparation classes, including the SAT, LSAT, and MCAT verbal sections. Most of the students are of South or East Asian American descent and are enrolled in programs that are one to two grade levels higher than those offered at their schools. Admission to the program requires an online application, school report cards, and an interview process. Students are placed in appropriate classes based on these results. While most students are enrolled in enrichment classes, the English lessons focus on improving their reading and writing skills for their respective grade levels.

Teaching writing at my center came with its own set of challenges. As a writing teacher, I often felt unmotivated due to my students' reactions and attitudes toward writing. I doubted their ability to produce quality writing. Regardless of gender or grade, they entered my class with the same dejected demeanor as Eeyore from *Winnie-the-Pooh*. The routine was predictable: hesitant entries, monotone queries about writing tasks, and collective sighs upon hearing the day's ELA assignment.

Most of my students are second-generation Asian Americans. Their immigrant parents, facing English language barriers, particularly in legal or official matters, enroll them in my education center, valuing reading and writing as a crucial skill in the U.S. While these students excel academically in their predominantly White schools in Long Island and are fluent English speakers, they prioritize math and sciences over literature. Their academic reports often show high grades, but they falter in English, with feedback highlighting "missing essay homework" or a "weak thesis."

As their private ELA teacher, I aimed to boost students' school grades by teaching them the dreaded "five-paragraph" essay. This rigid format, drilled into students' minds from elementary school and emphasized in standardized exams, insists on clear writing with an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion—because apparently, that's the only way to write academically. As a result, I felt obligated to follow what's being taught in most public schools, and since that's also how I was educated, I ended up emphasizing academic over creative writing, echoing Moffett's concern about prioritizing exposition writing from prescribed topics

(Moffett 1988). In class, I highlighted every grammatical error, expressing my frustration with remarks like, "Didn't I explain this before?" My meticulous feedback, laden with Google Docs comments, dampened their writing enthusiasm. This rigorous focus on perfection hindered their expression (Flower and Hayes 1981) and inadvertently fostered a dislike for ELA and writing.

My Changed Perception of Writing

My perspective on writing and teaching transformed during my graduate Rhetoric and Teaching course. Initially, I expected our weekly commentaries to be formal essays adhering to strict academic standards. However, our professor encouraged personal reflections and interpretations, promoting a more relaxed and engaging writing style. This approach contrasted sharply with my Applied Linguistics background, where using first-person pronouns in academic writing was discouraged.

My professor assigned weekly commentary writing tasks on Canvas. Each week, he would introduce the lesson with a brief explanation, such as: "This week, we'll expand our examination of academic writing by reading articles that critique how it is taught and question its hegemony in college prep and first-year college writing courses. We'll also read Moffett on the relationship between personal and academic writing and how writing is construed or misconstrued in school writing assignments."

He would then outline the writing task: "Writing Assignment: Two Parts: 1. Post a commentary on the discussion forum for this week on one or more of the assigned (or recommended) articles and reply to or participate in an ongoing discussion. 2. Write and post a brief reflection on the two related questions or problems: 'Why I Write and When I Want to Write.'"

I had never done assignments like this as a PhD student and never considered this kind of writing to be academic, especially since we were using first-person pronouns. However, as educated adults, we provided supporting details and appropriate citations in our commentaries. We didn't follow the strict five-paragraph essay format, but we successfully conveyed our opinions with intended meanings backed up by scholarly sources.

After completing our readings, we would individually post our honest reactions and opinions, responding to the writing prompts. Some students wrote extensively, while others wrote less, depending on how much they resonated with the readings. We openly posted constructive criticisms and critical questions under our classmates' postings. What was wonderful about these commentary assignments was that the professor also completed the same writing assignments, posting his feedback and reactions to each student's posts as if he were one of the students.

Although I am an ELA teacher, I was not used to sharing my writing with anyone, and the thought of posting my writing on Canvas for others to read was intimidating. Honestly, I think I was more worried about how my professor and peers would judge my writing. Because I spent hours thinking about how to compose my first commentary, I empathized with how my own students struggled with writing. However, after reading my professor's encouraging comments, which showed genuine interest in what I wrote, I smiled; I felt like an elementary school child who received 100% on her test for the first time.

Through Canvas commentaries, the professor shared personal stories, fostering mutual understanding among us. I discovered that two classmates, like me, had experienced second language acquisition of English after immigrating as children. Our discussions also provided insights into their Arab cultural backgrounds. Such exchanges,

as Heath (2009) points out, promote intercultural learning from experiences outside the classroom, aligning with González et al.'s (2005) "funds of knowledge" concept. Recognizing that good writing isn't always formal, I quickly introduced commentary writing to my after-school education center students.

In my typical ELA writing class, there are a maximum of four students placed according to their reading levels that I personally determine based on my teaching experience. On the first day of the class, we choose our reading list together for the entire 15 weeks of the semester during which we meet once a week for 1.5 hours. During each 1.5-hour session, I introduce the literature that the students will be reading for that week and assign a thought-provoking essay question pertaining to the reading. The students are required to read the entire book over the week before the next lesson and submit the essay through Google Classroom. In the following week, I introduce a new book and go over each of the four students' essays by projecting the writing on the wall. We verbally edit the essay together focusing on grammatical aspects and encouraging students to suggest improvements to make the writing better. This system works because students learn to organize their thoughts better and write with correct grammar, but it doesn't bring the same joy I experienced in my graduate class with commentary writing.

In my traditional ELA classes, the focus was on perfecting the five-paragraph essay, which often stifled creativity and enthusiasm. After discovering the joy and freedom of commentary writing, I decided to bring this approach to my students. The difference was immediate and profound. I started to post questions similar to those my professor posed on Canvas, and the result was a success. The students engaged more actively, shared their honest reactions and opinions, and felt more motivated to write. This approach fostered a more dynamic and interactive learning environment, making the writing process more enjoyable and encouraging for everyone involved.

If it were not for the commentary writing assignments, I would not fully understand what is on the minds of every student. Typically, the more vocal students dominate classroom discussions, often overshadowing others. However, the commentary writing assignments provide an opportunity for my quieter students to express their thoughts and opinions, often using textual references to support their ideas in a natural manner.

Here is a brief excerpt or a screenshot of how my all-male middle school students, in grades 7 and 8, responded to one of the weekly commentary assignments: "Read Act I of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare and feel free to write anything in the commentary section of the Google Classroom about the reading. Feel free to respond to one or more of your classmate's responses." This class happens to consist of students who are generally disengaged and express a strong dislike for reading. Therefore, I instructed them to write about whatever they wished after reading the first act and purposely did not assign any specific theme for discussion.

James (Pseudonym)

When I was reading Act I in the book, A Midsummer Night's Dream, I wondered why love played such a big role in the story. I am sure this will be further elaborated later in the book, but since I cannot read any further in the book, I decided to figure that out myself. I think that since the book has fairies in it, some of the characters in the book may have loved each other because of a spell or a form of magic. This is very possible because there is not much information on Oberon and Titania in the first act. They are the king and queen of the fairies and could be there for evil or be there for good.
I also feel that if there is this much love between characters in the story, it will eventually have to do with the plot of the story and how it flows. For example, if Oberon and Titania are actually casting love spells on one of the characters and they somehow find out, they could have a battle with the fairies and possibly have somebody get hurt or even die. If this happens, the plot will be changed especially if the character is important. This is why love is currently playing a big role in the story.

Benjamin (Pseudonym)

@James

When you said that the king and queen of fairies were maybe casting love spells, that would consider them as evil. I think that there is no way of them to be good unless they helped them with a big disaster. I also agree with you that love is an important role in this story. In the beginning of the book, it started with marriage and how Hermia was in love. Maybe later in the book, love will become a huge part of it.

James (Pseudonym)

@Benjamin

When I read your commentary, I also felt that it was unfair that Hermia was forced to marry Demetrius. She should be an independent woman and be free in what she wants to do. It is unfair that the men in this story had more power and rights than women did. Since this is not based on a true story, I think that William Shakespeare purposely made the men have more power to show the reader that a world like this would not be fair and balanced.

Samuel (Pseudonym)

@James

When reading the second paragraph of your commentary, although confused at first, I believe you have read ahead to Act II but I still will comment on your commentary. I also agree with you how love does play a big part in the story and also believe this will be further elaborated in the story as there is still many pages left in the book. Although I also think it's possible for Oberon and Titania to love each other because they have fallen under a spell as this story is a fantasy and fiction, I personally do not think this is the case. In my opinion, as although it's possible for a reason to be revealed later in the story, I think that there's no actual particular reason on why they fell in love. I think it's because Shakespeare is not trying to bring the reason on why they fell in love into the spotlight, but rather the hardships, difficulties, and situations that will come along with them because they fell in love in the first place. But unfortunately, I disagree with the idea that there will be a battle between fairies and others because of them casting love spells, since this story seems to be more of a love story than a epic.

As I reviewed their commentaries the night before our session, I could not help but smile. The next day, the usually quiet students entered the classroom animatedly "disputing" what they thought would happen in the next act of the play, playfully accusing one another of reading ahead. On that day, my classroom was transformed; it was dominated by the students themselves, who were actively discussing the

complicated theme of love, while I simply facilitated the discussion.

After experiencing the benefits of commentary assignments, I decided to implement this approach in all of my ELA classes at my education center. Writing commentaries and receiving feedback, along with open discussions among all students, including the teacher, brought joy and encouraged freer expression. This experience freed me from the constraints of writing perfectly formatted academic essays.

My Students' Changed Perceptions of Writing

Through Google Classroom, my students, aged nine to 16, engage in weekly commentaries on readings and discuss with classmates. With limited class sizes, I closely monitor their input for discussion topics. Relying on Lave and Wenger's (2020) situated learning theory, which emphasizes student collaboration and a centered learning environment, I anticipated richer conversations.

By examining these commentaries, I discerned their comprehension levels, eliminating the need for reading tests or in-class essays. The students collaboratively aided each other. After ten weeks of engaging in commentary writing, I sought feedback from my students. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive, revealing a dramatic shift in their attitudes toward writing. One student mentioned, "Ms. Kim, can we do commentarying this week?" Hence, "commentarying" became the term my students coined to describe the activity, and it quickly became a staple of our classroom vocabulary for the semester.

Having students write and review commentaries on readings has reshaped their views on writing and reading. Some mentioned that it made them "feel more at ease with writing" and clarified their thoughts. Reading peers' commentaries enhanced their understanding of the material and broadened their perspectives. Anticipating peers' responses, they felt encouraged to pose questions. One student likened waiting for commentary responses to awaiting postcards from friends, eager to read their reactions.

I was pleased to see how commentary writing prompted even my shyest students to join book discussions. I also understood why some were initially reluctant to participate. My 6th grader mentioned that posting commentaries reduced his fear of making mistakes in speech or writing. He noted: "Commentaries also help with seeing how we truly feel about the book without having to say anything that we feel what is 'supposed to be said.'"

I had not realized that my students thought there was only one correct answer to my writing questions, despite framing them as open-ended and seeking their opinions. Moreover, commentary writing made them feel more connected, leading to greater mutual respect and understanding.

Typically, one or two students dominate class discussions. It was challenging to engage quieter students without sidelining the active ones. However, commentary writing allowed all to share thoughts without monopolizing class time. One student commented: "[Commentaries] are extremely fun to do as I can socialize with people and give my opinions on their opinions ... it's fun to express ideas and questions you had about the book so other classmates can answer your questions and help you out."

Another student's response showed that replying to commentaries is not just fun to do; it makes the student feel important: "Having the ability to reply is the best part about the commentary because it would make me feel much more inclusive in the experience."

Some of my students have become more open-minded and expressive in both writing

and speaking. One female 8th grader wrote: "The commentaries opened up a small part of me to just write and stop worrying too much…the commentaries let me feel a bit looser and freer when writing."

After seeing my students' willingness to truly open up and share their thoughts, I decided to try something that would foster deeper conversations on literature. I wanted my students to use the commentary space to openly discuss topics related to politics, religion, or racism that they may not be allowed to talk about in their school classrooms. Before delving into these writing tasks, we engaged in open discussions on literary pieces they commented on, such as *Black Boy, Twelfth Night, and The Stranger*. Inspired by Moffett's (1989) inductive approach, I integrated students' personal stories and peers' experiences. The students' commentary-based discussions on topics like racism, gender, and morality became more insightful and engaging. Often, the dialogue was so animated that I scarcely had a chance to chime in. Here is an example of how our discussion, which branched out from our commentary writing, tackled the topic of racism based on Richard Wright's *Black Boy.*

Discussing Racism After Reading Wright's Memoir

Inspired by the profound impact of commentary writing, I wanted my students to tackle more complex and sensitive issues. We chose *Black Boy* by Richard Wright to explore themes of racism and identity. During our discussion on *Black Boy*, my high-achieving middle schoolers tackled the sensitive topic of racism, typically avoided by my Asian American students (Lee and Dijkgraaf 2022). David (pseudonym) shared in his commentary that he related to Wright's refusal to give a pre-determined graduation speech, recalling an incident at his school. In the memoir, Wright's principal cautioned against speaking freely in front of Whites (Wright 1966). David recounted a similar experience: his White teacher preferred a White student as the mock trial group's speaker, implying Asians were too quiet for leadership roles.

When I heard about David's experience, my eyes widened. I felt my blood pressure rise. Then, one of my students responded to David by saying, "Yeah, that's why we should read more books to be knowledgeable of others so we can deal with racism wisely." Hearing this student's response made me feel ashamed because my response would only stir up more hatred toward that teacher. I was relieved to hear that student's pensive comment. After that, another student said, "We still have racism going on because we stay passive not because we don't understand others." Another student asked, "So, how would you stop racism?" Then, the discussion about racism continued.

The students brought up what they knew about the Black Lives Matter movement, George Floyd, the Georgia shooting incident that killed eight people, six of whom were Asians, and anti-Asian attacks since the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the students expressed their opinions about how Asian people should not support the Black Lives Matter movement because many Asian people are attacked by Black people, while other students said we should support all kinds of movements that involve anti-racism. I wanted to make our discussions more directly related to the chapters in *Black Boy*, but I did not want to interrupt their conversation.

Listening to my students discuss racism, I conceptualized a brief writing task. I wanted them to articulate in writing the racial hierarchies depicted in *Black Boy* and examine how social media, news, and pop culture shape our views on different

cultures, ethnicities, and races. Furthermore, I inquired how such influences might impact our self-perception of racial/ethnic and cultural identity. I instructed them to initially share their thoughts via Google Classroom commentaries and then draft an outline addressing these racism-related topics.

In support of Moffett's (1988) transpersonal writing, I wanted to help my students learn to express ideas of "universal value in a personal voice" (170-171). I told them that, in addition to using the books, they could include their personal experiences or those of others to support their claims. My students were so surprised that I let them write their papers using first-person pronouns, and I was surprised to hear my students' voices in the hallway. I expected them to talk about video games, but they were still conversing about *Black Boy* and racism. Smiling, I called out to them in the hallway: "Don't forget to submit your essay outlines next week!"

Becoming a Writer

Through the process of writing commentary, my students found genuine joy in writing, which naturally boosted their confidence as writers. This transformation not only improved their writing skills but also created a more dynamic and collaborative classroom environment. "Commentarying" transformed many of my students' apprehensions about writing. They began to understand writing as a social, interactive practice. Through these exercises, they expanded their viewpoints and learned to articulate them, either collaboratively or independently. This process made them confident writers, shifting their view from dread to see it as a vital social activity. Heath (2009) posits that learning is rooted in socialization, while Nieto (2009) emphasizes the role of social context in education. Moffett (1987) suggests that successful learning connects with the broader "social world," fostering diverse ideas and choices (97, 119).

I agree with Hairston's (1982) argument that both skilled and unskilled writers must discover how to write by developing their topics intuitively, not methodically. Commentary writing provides students with a partial notion of what they want to write about, and they develop more profound ideas by dialoguing with their peers. As Murray (1976) emphasizes, we should teach writing as a process because we are not teaching a product.

Commentary writing enhanced my teaching approach, focusing on constructive feedback rather than unproductive criticism. Through discussions on racism derived from their commentaries, my students demonstrated an understanding that literature conveys cultural norms and attitudes (Rosenblatt 2005). They now walk into class resembling *Winnie-the-Pooh*'s Tigger, full of energy and enthusiasm. During these conversations, they respected their peers and engaged in collaborative learning, recognizing and appreciating their writing abilities. Now, anticipating my students' writing feels like awaiting postcards from friends.

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(Why) Haven't We Figured It Out by Now? Cultivating Joyful Teaching and Learning in ELA

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You took my joy, I want it back.
–Lucinda Williams, "Joy"

We've got no time for crying/We've got work to do. –Mavis Staples "We've Got Work to Do"

Despite our years of learning and teaching, our dedication to students, and our commitment to professional growth, there are still disagreements on how to define literacy, much less how to teach it. We could talk about multiple and conflicting literacy theories, and how each has priorities according to their research, goals, and subjectivities. Some contend that literacy is a social practice, multimodal, and embodied. Other educators want to keep literacy more narrowly defined to reading, writing, language, listening, and speaking skills. Old discussions regarding the efficacy of balanced literacy versus the science of reading have arisen again. The newest issue is the place of artificial intelligence (AI) in literacy learning, but since we don't know yet what AI will be, or even what it is right now, it's impossible to figure out what impact it will have.

We are increasingly aware of how economic, social, and political forces impact our schools, students, and ourselves. #Metoo, Black Lives Matter, and COVID revealed historical flaws in American institutions and thinking. Our awareness of and attendance to the myriad factors that impact our students' learning and well-being has grown, and yet many literacy curricula are homogenized even as our student population is increasingly diverse. Powerful forces are at work to limit students' access to contributions from culturally and sexually diverse authors through book bans and changes in state and district policies about what can and cannot be taught. Does this make literacy teaching an amorphous endeavor, subject only to the whims of politics, culture, and digital technology? It may seem like that to wary educators who have years of experience with curricula foisted on them by politically and financially motivated leaders. This creates confusion and disheartenment.

And yet there is, as always, hope. In her groundbreaking book *Unearthing Joy: A Guide to Culturally and Historically Responsive Teaching and Learning,* Gholdy Muhammad (2023) describes five pursuits in education, intentionally using the word "pursuit" to move beyond the limitations and endpoints of standards or goals (17). These pursuits are identity, skills, intellect, criticality, and joy. They are nonlinear, iterative practices and are part of a humanizing education, and the basis of her culturally and historically responsive framework. There is joy for teachers and students in recognizing students as brilliant (Christensen 2009) or as geniuses (Muhammad 2023). Bettina Love (2019) notes that joy does not spring from some make-believe land of perfection, but from facing the realities of colonialism, sexism, racism, poverty, and homophobia head on: "While we do not forget injustice, we are focused instead on love, well-being, and joy and refuse to be oppressed any longer" (12).

Joy and Absence

Maybe we will never figure out how to teach literacy in ways that are effective for all students, and maybe it's not even an appropriate or reasonable goal. Poet and conflict mediator Pádraig Ó Tuama (2021) asks us to undo some of our conditioned ideas and internalized rules about what it means to teach and learn. Instead of rules, there are stories. Our students' stories about who they are as literate beings blend and/or conflict with the stories projected onto them by families, teachers, friends, and governments. These stories can foreclose possibilities instead of creating openings. To address this, Ó Tuama notes that absence can be as important as presence. We need containers and we need vastness. These are not binaries but contain both/and: a deep focus on the interconnectedness within and amongst our inner selves, communities, and nature. There are spaces in between our heartbeats and in authentic dialogue, where listening is as necessary as talking. The spaces or absences create rhythm and energy. The same goes for teaching. To create, learn, and/or practice something new or challenging, time, practice, and failure are necessary. Ó Tuama (2021) offers the questions: "How does it fail? Does it fail well?" For teachers, this may evolve into panic: If we don't teach X now, the students won't know it for the test/won't be ready for the next unit/WILL NEVER LEARN TO READ (WELL). We have been taught that our job is to fix the flaws or address the learning gaps in and for our students, whether those came from families, friends, trauma, culture, or last year's teacher. Discomfort with failure means we don't get to celebrate growth and progress, only lament imperfection. Teaching and learning require risk-taking. There is joy in these risks. Fear of disapproval, of being wrong, robs us of joy. What if we celebrated our students' and our failures? Maybe one reason we haven't figured out literacy teaching is because of our fear of failure.

The lack of comfort with absence and failure is deeply embedded in the perception of not-enough-time. In the neoliberal capitalist economy of today's United States, we are all concerned with the value of time. Numerous self-help gurus offer us opportunities to save time, maximize time, time-share, mark time, find time, control time. We are to avoid wasting time or losing time, all in the name of productivity. What happens, though, if we step back and away, or pull ourselves out of this peculiar and particular perspective? What if we question and reclaim how time works? Perhaps the push to be present (to be perfect) is the opposite of what is needed. What would change if we saw literacy as a repertoire instead of a tool, as something containing both absence and presence, as something "...hard to see and describe and take the measure of, and also what's immeasurable, irreducible, non-quantifiable, limitless and expansive" (Restler 2023, 3)?

Joy and Art

According to architect Frank Lloyd Wright, symmetry is created through the relationship between repose and motion (Shoaff 2020). In music, the spaces between notes/strums/beats are necessary to create rhythm. This is also true of poetry. Ó Tuama suggests that time is a character in any poem or story and shows up in the blank spaces in poems: caesura, spacing between letters and words, silence. Skilled writers vary sentence structure to keep reader attention through presence and absence. There's more than just telling a story or relating facts. Sentences and words have rhythm and energy in and of themselves. Of knowing what to expect, but also having some surprises along the way. This is true of teaching as well.

We are all embedded in this culture, but that does not mean we have to accept it on its own terms. Muhammad writes, "Joy encompasses happiness/smiles, truth, beauty, aesthetics, art, wonder, personal fulfillment, and solutions to the social problems of the world" (70). Maybe it is enough to keep our eyes open and minds curious about what seems to be working in our specific communities and classrooms. But we must also be alert to how science evolves within the constraints of our communal intelligence, culture, and values. This allows us to see the unfolding drama of symmetry, gravity, time, and motion Lloyd Wright spoke of: "It is the resonance between our inner laws and the laws governing the greater universe that makes art a pathway to deep and meaningful experience" (Shoaff iv). Perhaps this is the way to restore, reclaim, and reinvigorate joy in our teaching. Mysteries of the world exist alongside observational data, and curiosity draws open new vistas of thought, wonder, and experience.

Awareness of Joy

Lama Rod Owens (2023) writes, "Joy is an expression of our natural mind and is felt as fluidity and potential. It is the experience of realizing that there are always alternatives, always different paths to take" (102). It is our responsibility to find, create, and cultivate joy for ourselves and for our students. For Ross Gay (2019), the practice of writing about delight builds up the muscle of recognizing joy, and then noticing the feeling that comes with it. It's not a trivial thing, this paying attention to joy and its attending thoughts and emotions. Perhaps that is our work. It's motivating, nourishing, and brings about ease, appreciation, and gratitude. It's also about sustainability and stamina, and the necessity of yin and yang, rest and play, presence and absence.

Perhaps the reason that joy is elusive in school is because school was not built for joy. It was built for diligence, competition, either/or thinking, and individualism. Despite that, we literacy educators have chosen to remain in schools and share the joys we find there. There are no universal ways of teaching and learning, but there are ways to make these practices more joyful: Seeing the brilliance of our students. Working for a more just world. Getting comfortable with the discomfort that comes with risk-taking. Finding and celebrating absence as well as presence. Tuning in to our "inner laws and the laws that govern the greater universe." If we see those universal laws as based in love, then joy is a practice and pursuit of human flourishing.

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Finding a Balance: Navigating High-Stakes Testing and Standardized Curricula for Joyful Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

In recent decades, education legislation and policies at the federal, state, and district levels have significantly impacted urban public schools in the United States. These policies prioritize high-stakes testing and the implementation of scripted and standardized curricula (Cataldo 2021). Consequently, they have had a disruptive effect on the potential for culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students to engage in joyful teaching and learning experiences (Muhammad 2023).

Legislators and policymakers' fixation upon high-stakes testing is one of the reasons why K-12 urban teachers continue to face the challenge of creating learning environments that provide diverse students with the opportunity to "understand themselves and the power structures that influence their worlds and how these structures operate to stifle or obfuscate young people's purpose" (Emdin 2021, ix).

In this essay, we, two early career urban English Language Arts (ELA) educators from northern New Jersey, share our thoughts on how we navigated the pressure of high-stakes tests and standardized curricula while providing our students with joyful teaching and learning experiences rooted in culturally and historically responsive pedagogy.

What Is Joyful Teaching and Learning?

Reflecting on our teaching experiences, we have learned that joyful teaching can look different across classrooms and teachers, as teachers bring different lived experiences to the classroom that are influenced by our complex and intersecting identities. For us, joyful teaching and learning is:

> To achieve a state of consciousness that allows one to operate in the world having mind, body, and spirit activated, validated, and whole without distortion or concession as one acquires all essential knowledge—academic knowledge, knowledge of self, knowledge of how to navigate one's immediate surroundings, knowledge of systems in which one is embedded (particularly those that are structured to disempower), and knowledge of the world (Emdin 2021, 1).

In other words, joyful teaching and learning captures a variety of emotions, ideas, and situations. It ranges from the excitement of inspiring students, seeing them grow as individuals and academics, and the incidental learning that can only exist within a school building. Joyful teaching and learning are nuanced and complex, especially in the face of systematic challenges.

American Educational Reforms Disrupt Joyful Teaching and Learning

In the 1990s and 2000s, American educational reforms focused on three main aspects: standards-based reform, standardized testing, and teacher accountability. These components were heavily debated among federal and state politicians, lobbyists, and education policymakers. The push for increased accountability stemmed from the belief that all students can achieve at higher levels and that schools must be held accountable for student learning and achievement (Cross, 2014). In fact, between the early 1990s and early 2000s, particularly during the presidencies of George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, "education reformers were convinced that if states, with federal assistance, helped establish academic standards and then held schools accountable for having their students meet standards, educational performance would improve" (Cross, 2014).

This belief resulted in the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. The main aim of the standards-based reform was to guarantee that every student was making progress and that teachers were being held accountable for student achievement. Since the 1990s, classroom instruction has become closely aligned with state teaching standards and standardized tests. Still today, the debate over standards-based reform and standardized testing in American public education continues, especially with educational scholars and researchers advocating for the use of culturally and historically responsive curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning (Muhammad 2023).

Debates on what should be taught in public schools lead to a narrow focus on standardized testing and promote a "one-size fits all" approach to curriculum. What this means is "curriculum and instruction today are still mostly, if not only, skills-driven, absent of cultural and historical responsiveness" (Muhammad 2023, 51). As a result, the needs and interests of culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students do not often get met, which can lead to disengagement and hinder students' ability to experience joyful teaching and learning experiences.

New Jersey ELA educators and students are bound by the New Jersey Student Learning Standards for English Language Arts (NJSLS-ELA). Educators must find a balance between adhering to legislation and policies, and providing culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students with an education that values their identities, abilities, and potential and empowers them to succeed in a fast-changing world.

Finding a Balance

Without joyful teaching and learning, being a teacher will boil down to "the status of specialized technicians within the school bureaucracy, whose function then becomes one of managing and implementing curricular programs rather than developing or critically appropriating curricula to fit specific pedagogical concerns" (Giroux 1988, 122).

Simply put, the teaching profession can easily turn into a career that focuses on routines (i.e., teaching scripted curricula) rather than mutual empowerment, critical thinking, and, most notably, the sharing and creation of new knowledge between teachers, their colleagues, and students. Because of this, it is crucial to find a balance between education legislation and policies at the federal, state, and district levels, while also promoting and sustaining joyful teaching and learning.

In our experiences as urban ELA teachers, we have learned that balancing teaching standards geared towards standardized testing and joyful teaching

requires a thorough understanding of NJSLS-ELA standards for the grade level you teach. The standards provide clear, detailed expectations for what all students should know and be able to do at the end of a grade level, serving as the foundation for designing curriculum, aligning assessment and accountability, and ensuring readiness for college, career, and life.

The NJSLS-ELA standards are "non-negotiable," and can feel like a barrier between educators and joyful experiences in education; however, we find that the more familiar a teacher is with the standards, the greater ability they have to teach them in a joyful way. In other words, to teach the concepts in a joyful way, instead of teaching to the test, educators must understand the expectation placed upon them. They cannot begin to spark joy if this is not understood; being forewarned is to be forearmed.

Once we understood our standards, we were able to provide our students with joyful teaching and learning experiences rooted in culturally and historically responsive pedagogy. That is, we began incorporating culturally relevant texts (CRTs) into our lessons that portray diverse cultures, ethnicities, races, religions, and perspectives and authentically discuss social and racial injustices. We found that incorporating CRTs into our classroom allowed for more moments of joyful teaching and learning since they enabled students to broaden their understanding and gain insights into diverse cultures, perspectives, and experiences beyond their own.

In addition to including CRTs, we expanded our definition of literature to be more inclusive of students' prior knowledge and interests. For example, analyzing text structure can be taught utilizing the lyrics of a popular song. Playing the song and analyzing the structure of it meets the state set standards, engages the students, and allows joy to enter the learning space. Once students are hooked and understand songs have structures similar to poems, classes can analyze other text structures using CRTs. By understanding the standards fully, teachers can better integrate joy into their lessons and create authentic, joyful learning moments in their classroom community.

Conclusion

Teaching can feel prescribed and mundane when there is an absence of joy in the classroom. The most important way to find joy in teaching and learning is understanding the policies that are being placed upon states, districts, and individual schools. By gaining knowledge of the expectations and standards schools must teach, teachers can then better meet the needs of their culturally, racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students and provide them with learning experiences that are joyful and rooted in culturally and historically responsive best practices.

Reflection Questions for Teachers

1. What are your thoughts on the current state of American education reform?
2. Do you think that throughout history, American education reformers have ever considered prioritizing joyful teaching and learning experiences in classrooms when creating and enacting legislation and policies at the federal, state, and local levels?
3. Your experiences are invaluable. How do high-stakes testing and standardized curricula impact your pedagogical approaches and learning experiences that you provide your students?
4. How have you maintained a sense of joy and creativity in teaching while navigating high-stakes testing and standardized curricula in your classroom?
5. How can you adapt your teaching practices to address students' individual needs while still working within the

framework of standardized curricula and testing requirements?

6. Can you share an example of successful teaching methods or pedagogical approaches that you have implemented that integrate joy into the learning process while aligning with standardized curricula?

7. How do you engage with other educators or seek professional development opportunities to navigate the challenges of high-stakes testing and standardized curricula while promoting joyful teaching and learning?

8. How do you maintain your passion for teaching and learning in the face of external pressures related to high-stakes testing and standardized curricula?

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

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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 onamission
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 Saundra." 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 Yourselves" (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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Facilitating Joy in the Literacy Classroom by Recognizing Preferences of Core Personality Styles

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Joy is the centerpiece at the table of learning. In literacy classrooms, however, we often welcome students to a banquet of texts without adequately assessing their tastes and curating our menus to their palates. It's no wonder. We are pressed forward, making our best efforts to fill the deep gaps of students' skill deficits in a post-COVID world, as we work to meet district benchmarks, prepare for standardized testing, cover curricula, overcome impossible student to teacher ratios, and so much more.

On the other hand, there are more ingredients available to teachers than ever before as we form the recipe for our students' success. The master teacher, as the master chef, knows which are the most potent. There is a way to approach the reading environment that will not cause an educator to collapse under the demands of today's classroom. We can accelerate skill development by inviting students to linger at our tables for long enough to savor new tastes—and to facilitate this, we must prioritize joy.

It is not a shocking assertion that when students enjoy reading, skill gains become more rapidly achieved. According to the article, "How to Speed Read for Increased Comprehension," published by Iris Reading, LLC, a pioneer in speed reading and memory training for Fortune 500 companies, NASA, and multiple prestigious universities, "Passion and enthusiasm draw our attention and motivate us to concentrate and absorb more of what we read, helping us to read faster and remember more information." However, educators do not often pause to recognize the power of this factor. An extensive study conducted by Jihyun Lee (2014) examined reading patterns in students from five Eastern countries with the highest reading performance (China, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan), five Western countries with the highest reading performance (Finland, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the Netherlands), and three other influential nations in the world (the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom). The core of this research centered on discovering similarities in these 13 differing nations and cultures that would be the greatest predictors of students having strong reading skills. The study concluded that the principal components of human learning do not vary across nations, regardless of their vastly different education, culture, and language systems. In every region and country, the primary indicator of reading achievement was how much students enjoy reading. Lee claims that, "institutional and resource variables are not the secret ingredients of high academic performance of students" since school funding, availability of instructional aids, starting age of education, number of hours in school, ability grouping, etc. provided less of a guarantee for strong reading skills than whether students found pleasure in reading. This correlation between joy and reading success builds a foundational claim that students' reading enjoyment ought to be one of the essential goals held by any teacher of reading.

Personality labeling systems such as Myers-Briggs and Don Lowry's "True Colors" are some of the most helpful tools

that educators can harness as they seek to increase students' joy. When teachers recognize how personality styles typically coincide with reading preferences, they can more readily guide students to overcome individual struggles and frustrations. Instructors can encourage students to experiment with new strategies and gain an acceptance of differences between themselves and other readers, ultimately increasing reading enjoyment and volume.

While teaching eighth-grade English over the past 16 years, differentiating for the needs of all types of readers has been a major concern for me as a practitioner. Having applied "True Colors" and Myers-Briggs to my classroom via four years of student surveys and interviews, with over 400 students studied, I have gained insights regarding students greatest likes and dislikes that have enabled me to infuse ever-increasing joy into my students' reading process—first by making the reading environment tailored to more personality types (with an especially significant emphasis on the needs of struggling readers) and also by increasing my knowledge of texts that match different personality styles' reading preferences.

In implementing differentiation via personality styles, the satisfaction I have found in the effort of learning has grown alongside of my students' joy. The gains were evident in the 2023-2024 school year as 58 percent of my students read at least 2,000 pages, nearly 80 percent improved over a year's worth of proficiency according to district standardized benchmarks, and nearly all of my students indicated that they enjoyed reading more by June than they had in September on the end of year survey. My students are comprised of a wide variety of demographics, including individuals with IEPs and basic skills challenges. The top three page-leaders (two of whom have 504 plans) from my on-grade-level classes read 13,115 pages, 7,786 pages, and 7,771 pages each. One boy, who learned to delight in reading once he found the types of books he loved, conquered 5,243 pages even though he was placed in an Orton Gillingham resource class as a dyslexic, resistant reader in the previous year.

I have one 45-minute period a day with these students, their sole source of reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary, grammar, and spelling instruction. Nevertheless, I carve out 10 minutes of silent independent reading time in three class periods a week, usually at the start of class on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. I allow students to read any books they choose (beyond the curriculum of academic classes), and they are permitted to abandon books at any point in time, since having zero commitment to texts increases their receptivity towards new styles. At the start of the year, there is a learning curve for students while searching for titles that are most likely to match their tastes. I offer assistance each time a student nears the end of a book with the goal of always having a next choice lined up to prevent gaps in reading, but I strive to let the choice be the student's own. Autonomy is of vast importance if individuals are to ultimately become readers beyond the school day. When a student struggles to find a match, one useful technique is to present a pile of three to five books that fit the parameters commonly desired by that individual's personality style. Since I survey students at the start of the year, I enter independent reading conferences with some knowledge and can usually make several good recommendations. However, if finding a book that suits a student's preferences continues to be difficult, another strategy is to let that student sample genres through shorter texts. Furthermore, adjusting reading levels to find an appropriate challenge can be helpful. Especially for reluctant readers,

easing up on difficulty in self-selected reading may increase accessibility so that conflicts or characters can be appreciated in a way that the rigor of texts in the language arts curriculum may not allow. By the end of the school year, 30 minutes of choice reading a week along with reading in assigned texts does not add up to several thousand pages. Yet, providing students with frequent encounters with books they enjoy will often lead them to read extra on their own time, especially as they reach climaxes of plots they find intriguing.

Another aspect that has increased students' joy regarding choice reading is to make the assessments low-stakes. At the start of every week, a clipboard which I call the "Status of the Class" circulates the room so that students can provide me with their current book titles, page numbers, and favorite vocabulary words from that week's reading. To make this procedure less wearisome, I give a simple reward to a student in each class who furnishes an impressive word. The terms students supply on the "Status of the Class" are also the source for our biweekly vocabulary list, giving students some influence over the words they will be required to study. Throughout the week, I check in with all students individually or in small groups, having a quick conversation with each of them about their books or reading strategies. These reading conferences go a long way towards forging connections that show my pupils that the effort they put into reading is meaningful to me. Towards the end of each week, I ask students to write in their journal regarding their independent book, always allowing students the option to write a free reaction to their book while also providing multiple prompts in case a sentence starter or question is needed. Journal notebooks are graded once a month with independent reading responses comprising one section of the rubric. Since all other independent reading assessments fall into the class participation category, students have many opportunities to do well with this style of reading without necessitating many formal evaluations. In this way and many others, teaching with personality in mind has accelerated students' growth without requiring extra time and preparation from me as a professional. With so many aspects of our pedagogy that meet with conflict in the day-to-day operations of the classroom, how much more important is it that we embrace methods such as these to increase our joy?

Even though the four categories of "True Colors" and the 16 categories of Myers-Briggs are far too basic to capture the essence of any person with full accuracy, both systems are a simplification that can aid individuals as they strive to understand general types of temperaments, values, motivations, capabilities, etc. As tools used by teachers to deepen their understanding of individual students, viewing the classroom through the lens of personality labels can save time as well as help educators gain greater depth in connecting with the classroom community. Furthermore, when it comes to links between reading preferences and personality types, a myriad of essential applications opens.

One point I do need to qualify is that, overall, the most worrying aspect of my personal research in this field is that there is so little pre-existing data to examine. For this reason, I have used my own students as resources. I did not find any other teacher research published regarding this topic. There is a need for practitioners' studies and statistics to further explore the impact that differentiating based on personality styles can have on reading instruction.

At the onset, my goal was to explore how personality styles could potentially uncover patterns in reading preferences. I was searching for a shortcut to make

conferences with students regarding reading choices more productive and likely to help them find books they would love. I had noticed that students' reading rates increased when they worked through texts they enjoyed. If I could increase the total number of books students read and liked, I could increase their total pages read, and accelerate their reading growth. After half a decade of analysis, disaggregating data from over 25 classes of middle school readers, along with interviewing dozens of humanities teachers, I have gained much more insight than originally anticipated.

Sensory Perceivers (Orange) ● Thrive with movement in reading environment ● Sufficient "white noise" facilitates concentration ● Appreciate alternate structures and spontaneity ● Prefer direct, action-based plots that begin with conflict and have humor or characters in danger ● Benefit from explicit instruction in preferences and autonomy over reading environment ● Measure success by enjoyment	Sensory Judgers (Gold) ● Thrive with goals for self-improvement or a purpose for reading given by instructor ● Appreciate clearly defined structure in reading environment and text organization ● Prefer action-based plots, short expositions, realistic conflicts/characters ● Measure success by completion
Intuitive Thinkers (Green) ● Thrive with independence and intellectual freedom ● Read to think or learn ● Perceive reading as a process for gaining meaning and knowledge ● Appreciate non-fiction, sardonic tone, fantasy, sci-fi, texts that challenge ● Dislike waiting for classmates and discussions ● Opinionated, logical, curious, question authority	Intuitive Feelers (Blue) ● Thrive with connection to characters and classmates ● Adaptable to various environments ● Appreciate character development and likeable or relatable characters ● Read to "get lost," experience, relate

• Measure success by competency	• Measure success by how feelings were impacted

The simplest way to present findings is to detail the main features that students in each of the four core personality types have in common. These categories include: sensory perceivers (Myers-Briggs) also known as the "orange" personality type ("True Colors"), sensory judgers also known as the "gold" personality type, intuitive thinkers also known as the "green" personality type, and intuitive feelers also known as the "blue" personality type. The descriptions listed in each quadrant of the table above are how I have witnessed each of the personality types reflected in reading styles as I compared hundreds of student and educator testimonies over the past five years. All of these personalities have strengths, weaknesses, and preferences in the literacy classroom. Every student can benefit from teachers gaining knowledge of their personality patterns. However, data within my classroom studies as well as professional research cause one type to stand out as the group of students most likely to need teacher support to increase their joy in reading and ultimately their success as readers. In *True Colors: The Personality of Education*, Susan Kruger Winter asserts that only three percent of teachers in the U.S. identify as the "orange" personality type even though this temperament makes up 35 percent of the general population. As a result, few of these students will ever have a reading teacher model for them how a successful individual with this temperament approaches a text, unless educators take the initiative to learn about the specific needs of sensory perceivers.

Although findings regarding every personality type currently inform my instruction, my concerns for sensory perceivers were an impetus for how in-depth my investigation of the topic of personality styles and reading needs became. My first formal set of research ran from September 2020 until June 2021 with a general survey of 111 eighth grade students via Google Forms regarding reading preferences and temperament. Standardized testing data was matched with student responses from the survey to add in the context of skill levels. After this, 30 students and eight adult readers were interviewed in small groups or individually for further information collection. Finally, all findings were interpreted and analyzed by five veteran literacy teachers actively working in the New Jersey public school system for increased objectivity. In this study, I gathered data from 40 students who self-identified as "orange." Seventeen of these students claimed to hate reading. Twelve of them reported that they dislike it. In total, 72 percent of my students in the sensory perceiver personality type during that school year had strongly negative feelings towards reading. Furthermore, this group claimed to read for fun or non-essential learning with the least frequency. Also, according to reading benchmarks, the greatest percentage of lower performing readers was comprised of individuals who identified as this personality type.

Since this starting point, I have continued to compile evidence through the same surveys and interview questions for the past three years. Data collected at the start of the year maintain similar percentages of students in the "orange" personality type who do not find reading enjoyable. With four years of data compiled from approximately 400 students, patterns have emerged. The primary determining factors that separate high-achieving sensory

perceivers from those with lower proficiency rates are self-awareness and perceived autonomy in manipulating the reading environment to suit the individual's needs for movement, brain breaks, and sufficient noise/quiet. Typically, students with this personality style note that the proper reading environment is more important to their success than whether they appreciate the text being read, although they do have significant patterns in book preferences. In fact, nearly all sensory perceivers claim that movement while reading is helpful to them and more than half state that they have more success in comprehension while reading aloud with others or listening to the text while reading.

One "orange" who elects to read more frequently than many of his personality group peers and scores well on standardized testing echoed the sentiment of a large percentage of his fellow sensory perceivers when he explained that he likes reading at home better than in school because his reading style causes him stress in class. He is so focused on keeping his behavior in line to avoid upsetting the teacher and fellow students that he reads less efficiently. In a small-group interview during 2021, he stated that at home, "I usually sit in a rocking chair. Having the freedom to move without getting in trouble for disrupting others helps me focus." This boy, like many other students who identify as the same personality type, suggested that figuring out the optimal environment to facilitate movement that enables him to focus is a key factor in reading comprehension and enjoyment. In class, this student would sometimes struggle to efficiently move through pages during individual reading time. However, once we opened a dialogue about his needs within the reading environment and he realized his ability to modify his own surroundings, he learned ways to increase his focus, comprehension, and enjoyment of in-class reading time. He found that sitting alone on my heater (shaped like a bench and therefore providing more freedom to change positions than a desk) with earbuds in (for white noise, not music) helped. Unfortunately, most sensory perceivers note that the setting in which they read during the school day is somehow too stimulating (others talking or making noise) while also not being stimulating enough (no movement permitted). This, they say, directly reduces their ability to become lost in a text and hinders continued concentration on reading.

Additionally, individuals with the sensory perceiver personality also experience a great deal of consensus regarding books that fit their preferences. Though these readers often mention the genres of humor and horror as enjoyable, their tastes center more on fast-paced plots. According to nearly all 160 sensory perceivers surveyed over the past five years the most important factor for them in a text is for it to entertain. Therefore, nearly all sensory perceivers assert that finding a text that begins with tension or events that grip them as readers is essential. In terms of structure, they are more likely than other personalities to appreciate the alternative forms of plots found in graphic novels, short stories, comics, manga, online writing forums, etc.

Genres that sensory perceivers often dislike include romance, historical fiction, and any texts with exposition requiring a commitment to connect with characters before moving forward. One girl with mid-achieving proficiency who identifies as an "orange" personality type defined for me the texts she dislikes as, "Anything that does not give creative freedom to wonder what is next." She connects with most sensory perceivers' desire for excitement about surprises found in an unpredictable and intense conflict. Likewise, the majority of

students in this personality type claim to dislike all genres of non-fiction except for memoirs with dramatic survival stories. Similarly, sports-based texts are often a source of frustration because many sensory perceivers enjoy athletics, but many books that have sports as a key topic are character-based, not action-based—to make matters worse, those plots are often predictable and have low-stakes problems. Although some sensory judgers and intuitive feelers may gravitate towards those texts, students who identify as "orange" would not be likely to do so.

In literacy classrooms, educators can address the values of all personality styles in the learning environment as well as through the availability of text preferences without putting forth an overwhelming amount of effort. Starting the school year with surveys to learn about students is a common practice for most teachers. After an educator learns how to recognize the patterns of students' preferences via personality types, many timesaving applications emerge. For instance, in this past September's survey, a girl wrote, "For the personality test I got orange. While I was reading the personality traits, a lot of them seemed to describe me. I am curious… I am kinesthetic… I don't like only having a few options. I like a wide variety… I don't like to read anything that has too many words on one page. The reason behind that is because I get distracted a lot." Once I read this, I knew that I needed to ask her follow-up questions about her current strategies for movement while focusing on a text, if she has unintentionally been in trouble in other classroom reading environments, whether she rewards herself with brain breaks after a set time of reading, and what types of conflicts captivate her. This student, who had struggled to move beyond pretending to read and trying to remain out of trouble in previous years' English classes, was fairly easy to instruct regarding how to modify her own environment by setting a timer for breaks and transitioning to a corner space where movement without distracting others was possible. She also frequently chose to read aloud with a well-focused partner who identified as an intuitive feeler. In June, this same reader presented me with survey feedback commonly reported by her personality type as she wrote, "From September to now, I feel like I have read a whole lot more than previous years. Last year, I would barely read books and skim through pages just to get it over with. Now, I've taken my time reading. And now I read in and even outside the classroom! The me of September would never have thought I would read 2,517 pages in a span of 10 months. And I 100% know that I am a better reader because of that improvement. I feel I have better understanding of what books would keep me reading and which books I will not enjoy." Once the needs of sensory perceivers like this student are addressed, educators can help sensory judgers to work towards goals of self-improvement, can support intuitive thinkers in their efforts to find texts that will challenge them intellectually, and can guide intuitive feelers towards characters with whom they will experience inspiration and connection.

Although students' temperaments will shift over time as their identities change and mature, raising awareness of personality types teaches pupils how to address reading challenges with introspection and resilience. Learning strategies that work for them as individuals fosters the belief that reading skills are enhanced through practice. Moreover, conversing with students about the strengths and weaknesses of the varying personality types enables them to perceive that there are many preferences of value, not one correct answer about who readers ought to be.

I have seen many struggling readers learn how they read most efficiently, learn how to fall in love with books' characters, conflicts, or settings. Through recognizing patterns of students' personality styles, educators can guide their pupils towards a joy that draws them to the lifelong feast of reading. The first step is to perceive our literacy classrooms as an irresistible banquet with a diversity of joy that is available to all types of learners. Truly, when our students sample the abundance of tastes before them, they will learn the enormity of their appetites and will finally crave reading's manifold flavors.

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Centering Joy in the Classroom: Authentic Pedagogy Through Mindfulness and Purpose

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Authenticity is the linchpin for creating meaningful, equitable, and joyful learning experiences. Genuine face-to-face interactions between teachers and students are crucial for our collective recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating a shift from computer screens to real-time interactions. As educators, we must intentionally model authentic engagement with our students and course content, thereby fostering joy in the learning experience. This paper explores how authentic pedagogy, grounded in mindfulness and purpose, can increase joy in the classroom and enhance the sustainability of the teaching profession. It targets secondary and post-secondary educators, pre-service teachers, and teacher education programs, emphasizing that key literacy skills are fundamental to a free and civil society.[1] Such skills, while essential, need not come at the expense of joy. Fortunately, as demonstrated by educators like Linda Christensen, Zaretta Hammond, and Gholdy Muhammad, it is possible to experience such joy without sacrificing rigor.[2]

The link connecting authenticity and joy can be found in authenticity's transformative power to create meaningful, genuine connections between educators and learners. In the educational context, authenticity involves being true to oneself and transparent about pedagogy, while meaningfully connecting with students to create a safe, inclusive, and enriching learning environment. In such an environment, trust, positivity, and curiosity thrive. Authentic teachers can then use this positive momentum to overcome barriers impeding communication and understanding in the student/teacher relationship, thus setting the stage for creative risk-taking and productive struggle within the classroom (Christensen 1). We do so by modeling purpose and mindfulness for students daily. Essentially, when students are uninhibited by the fear of failure, they are open to experiencing joy. This joy leads them down a path toward lifelong learning, and that lifelong learning benefits us all.

Finding Purpose

By seeking an authentic purpose in learning, we establish the groundwork for a more joyful classroom. The social psychologist Michael Argyle demonstrates a clear correlation between purpose—our reasons for waking up each morning and

[1] Over the course of my fourteen-year career in education, I have had the privilege of working with students from middle school to postgraduate levels. My journey began teaching upper-level English courses at a suburban high school. Subsequently, I transitioned to a low-SES K-8 school, where I taught reading and language arts to skill-banded 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. For the past eight years, I have been dedicated to higher education, currently overseeing an educator licensure program at a state university and teaching theory and methods courses to practicing and pre-service teachers. These diverse teaching experiences have reinforced my belief that joy is a crucial element of any effective learning environment. This essay is thus written with the intention of addressing the varied needs and perspectives of a broad audience of educators.

[2] The definition of "rigor" in education has been debated for decades. See Tony Wagner's opinion piece in *Education Week* for a thoughtful description of how school leaders have asked the question, "What is rigor?" since the early twenty-first century.

engaging in daily activities—and the amount of satisfaction and happiness we feel or experience (157). When infusing the classroom with joy, this means both the teacher and the students need to see a purpose for their learning (*Unearthing* 16). Gholdy Muhammad offers five pursuits as a means of focusing classroom purpose in a just and equitable way. These pursuits show us that the development of skills can be greatly augmented by identity development, including ways to help students view themselves as intellectuals and their world with criticality. This informs my purpose as an educator, which is to empower students and help them navigate a complex, technology-saturated world. I tell them I can do so by fostering curiosity and a sense of playfulness in the classroom. By the end of the semester, nearly all of them believe me.

One way that teachers can help students discover and maintain a sense of purpose is by asking students to set their own learning goals in the classroom. For example, in the "WOOP" model, students create "**w**ish statements," identify "**o**utcomes" and "**o**bstacles," and then make a "**p**lan" to "defeat" said obstacles (Oettingen; cited in Piccoli). This includes students as co-creators in the classroom and gives them a say in how they spend their time each day. In my classroom, this looks different depending on the age and developmental stage of my learners. For example, at the middle school level, I begin by presenting students with a menu of literacy skills connected to diverse personal and professional pursuits. We discuss the value and transferability of such skills in the broader world, then I ask students to reflect on their identities and interests beyond the classroom.[3] In small groups, they share these interests and brainstorm connections to one or more of the previewed literacy skills. With scaffolding and support, each student develops their own achievable learning goals, which subsequently become the focal point and primary purpose of their learning journey in my classroom.

To illustrate, I worked with a group of middle school students facing challenges in both academic confidence and essential literacy skills. In the initial weeks of the semester, I dedicated time to getting to know these students through a series of activities focused on fostering self-awareness, building a sense of community, and promoting reflection. These activities included interest surveys, free writes, "I Am" poems, small and whole group discussions, and brief presentations where students taught each other various skills and ideas. Throughout these activities, I encouraged students to draw on their strengths, urging them to identify their existing interests and talents. As I gained a deeper understanding of the individuals in my classroom, we shifted to a review of age-appropriate literacy skills. Together, we discussed how individual skills might be applied beyond the classroom setting. In a particularly impactful conversation, students identified various professions they were interested in, ranging from NBA players and rap artists to graphic novelists, doctors, missionaries, and teachers. While it was straightforward to link professions requiring a college education to the work in my ELA classroom, the connections to other pursuits required a bit more work to clarify.

Inquiring into the perspectives of my aspiring athletes, I sought authentic insights into the most crucial traits defining a successful basketball player. Student responses painted a diverse picture, highlighting attributes such as

[3] I define the concept of "transferability" for students using the text, *Understanding by Design*: "The ability to transfer our knowledge and skill effectively involves the capacity to take what we know and use it creatively, flexibly, fluently, in different settings or problems, on our own" (Wiggins and McTighe 40).

determination, talent, and grit, which laid the groundwork for introducing the concept of "productive struggle" (Hammond 12; see also Ritchhart, Means, and Knapp). Productive struggle acknowledges the positive learning outcomes that occur when students engage in challenging tasks. It also foregrounds confidence and resilience as integral components of "grit" (Sririam 1). With this foundation, I then asked students to identify and discuss recent challenges they had experienced. As might be expected, many of these challenges were academic in nature. Centered around the importance of persistence and resilience, I helped students draw connections between the dedication required for athletic excellence and the process of honing academic skills. These connections became particularly evident as students noted struggles with reading comprehension, writing stamina, and vocabulary acquisition. Focused on these necessary but elusive literacy skills, each student set 1-2 learning goals with various checkpoints throughout the semester. As learners progressed in their skills acquisition, I made it a point to celebrate their successes. And more importantly, during moments of struggle, we collectively acknowledged and honored the grit and persistence demonstrated and developed by students as they worked through challenges. While minimizing the fear of failure, this approach enabled me to effectively engage my middle school learners in the authentic pursuit of literacy skills, anchored to a greater purpose.

By way of further example, in my high school English classroom, I had a student named Derek who faced significant challenges with vocabulary acquisition.[4] Despite his struggles, Derek's dream was to become a professional athlete, specifically a football player. Understanding the importance of effective communication both on and off the field, Derek and I worked together to set meaningful goals using a modified version of the WOOP model. His **w**ish was to enhance his vocabulary to articulate his thoughts clearly during interviews and team discussions. Together, we identified the **o**utcome of being able to confidently use a diverse range of words, and the **o**bstacle of his limited vocabulary base. Derek's **p**lan involved incorporating daily reading of sports articles and using a vocabulary-building app on his phone. Over the semester, Derek's dedication and resilience grew palpable. He diligently practiced new words, integrating them into class discussions and written assignments. During a class presentation, where Derek eloquently analyzed a sports commentary article, his classmates and I celebrated his progress with a round of applause to which he bowed with flourish. We recognized not only his expanding vocabulary but also his unwavering grit. This recognition not only highlighted his expanding vocabulary but also his intrinsic joy and sense of fulfillment in mastering new skills. By connecting his academic endeavors to his athletic aspirations, we underscored the transferability of these skills, reinforcing his sense of purpose and joy in our ELA classroom.

Practicing Mindfulness

While purpose is crucial for fostering an authentic, productive, and joyful learning environment, mindfulness holds equal, if not greater, significance. When referring to mindfulness, I draw on three interrelated concepts: self-awareness, presence, and grace. A teacher's self-awareness directly informs their ability to create a safe and inclusive learning environment, as well as to engage in socially just and culturally

[4] All student names are pseudonyms.

responsive teaching (*Unearthing* 55, 85). An individual's situated perspective, or cultural frame of reference, informs the relationships we build, the pedagogical approaches we take, and the assumptions or biases we carry (Hammond 56-58; *Unearthing* 91-93). In my role as a university professor, I often work with pre-service teachers to reflect on and identify the cultural frames of reference they bring to the classroom. Such reflective work can be greatly supplemented by drawing on readings by researcher-educators such as Hammond, Muhammad, Danielle Lillge, and Ashley Boyd. Equipped with a robust theoretical framework for self-reflection, pre-service teachers can more effectively engage in activities focused on recognizing and uncovering implicit values and biases, which ultimately enables them to bring a more authentic self to the learning space.

Identity should be introduced as a nuanced and complicated combination of positionalities, and both students and pre-service teachers should be encouraged to recognize and investigate numerous elements of their identity to develop self-awareness. In addition to engaging in reflective free writes aimed at prompting individuals to identify and articulate meaningful experiences related to culture, religion, race, language, class, sexuality, and gender identity, pre-service teachers also benefit from being paired with peers whose identities differ from their own. This can be done while avoiding tokenism or the exploitation of minority identities by using identity markers that are not connected to race, ethnicity, religion, or sexuality. For instance, I have had students fill out interest and identity surveys at the beginning of the semester that include low-stakes identity markers such as their favorite music genre, ice cream flavor, or sports team. We then dig into the more loaded aspects of identity as the semester continues, beginning with the premise that no individual should ever be asked to serve as a representative of an entire demographic. Implemented as a type of academic buddy system, these diverse pairs then progress through coursework together, serving as study partners and participating in various relationship-building activities, including a Socratic podcast assignment in which they interview each other by asking a series of increasingly reflective and critical questions. Throughout this collaborative work, I encourage pre-service teachers to confront their biases and assumptions.[5] At the semester's end, each learner reflects on the process, identifying ways they have learned and grown. As a part of this, the pre-service teacher gains insight into their own situated perspective and makes meaningful connections to their future as an educator. While this focused social, emotional, and relational work can be adapted for younger students, meticulous preparation and thoughtful framing become even more crucial in this context. Beginning with a simple "I Am" discussion prompt that involves repeated rounds of sharing with a partner can help underscore the complexity of identity and lay the groundwork for celebrating pluralism in the classroom.[6]

[5] For ways to support mindfulness practices in a multicultural classroom, see David Rodgers.

[6] This type of activity can be used productively at any point in a semester or school year. Pair students and provide them with instructions. Ask students to answer the question, "Who am I?" by speaking continuously for one minute while their partner listens. At the end of the minute, switch roles and have the other person share. Repeat this process three or more times—depending on the age and maturity of students—with the prompt that participants cannot repeat information they have already shared. At the end, have students reflect on the diversity of their identities and experiences. Encourage them to consider how sharing and listening to their peers' stories fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of the multicultural dynamics within the

Presence is another key aspect of mindfulness, which can increase the levels of joy and fulfillment in learning. In my conversations with pre-service teachers about the significance of presence, I often refer to the work of the activist-educator and author Jerry Farber. In "Teaching and Presence," Farber addresses concerns about classroom management and explores what happens when we fully immerse ourselves in the current moment. The educator who is truly present can respond meaningfully to what takes place in real time. And by recognizing, acknowledging, and communicating with the myriad physical, emotional, and intellectual identities in the classroom, we can maximize the effectiveness and relevance of our instruction. All moments are teachable, and a teacher who is fully present makes every moment matter. This immersive approach extends beyond mere presence; it involves skillfully crafting authentic and purposeful interactions with students, thereby constructing a rich tapestry of engagement and mutual understanding. Conversely, we know a distracted or bored educator can lead to dissatisfactory outcomes, including making students feel alienated, unmotivated, or apathetic (Farber 216). Such apathy in turn stifles the pursuit of joy, diminishes the likelihood of creative risk-taking, and hinders profound, transferable learning experiences. Farber tells us that to be fully present is to remember that the classroom is

> a place where individual worlds, individual universes converge in real time and real space. Each person there is an absolute center, and yet, with respect to the classroom itself, each person is also an emissary: from a family, a set of locales, a set of social contexts, a long history of nights and days. (Farber 216)

Approaching the classroom as a profoundly pluralistic and intersectional nexus empowers us to build relationships with all students, to recognize the intricacies of identity, and to ground ourselves in the precise space and moment at hand. A spectrum of mindfulness practices, encompassing breathing techniques, in-class yoga, guided meditations, visualizations, and focused personal writings, collectively serve to align both our students and us within a shared learning space. Engaging in these practices fosters relationship building, while enhancing teacher uptake and the ability to respond meaningfully in real-time to the unfolding dynamics in the classroom.

Grace is the final element of mindfulness I use when fostering joyful learning. In this context, grace represents a cultivated form of civil goodwill, characterized by giving individuals the benefit of the doubt. Extending grace, both to oneself and to others, is indispensable for building robust positive relationships, persuading students to embrace productive struggle, and establishing an environment where all learners feel secure to experiment, explore, and take creative risks. This approach aligns with the shift towards strength-based pedagogy and has personally helped me avoid deficit thinking (Hammond 59).[7] Author and professor Sharon Shelton-Colangelo further articulates this concept of grace, when they assert, "In order to create joy in our classrooms [...] we must cultivate our own compassion and love, especially for those students who are most in need" (110).

classroom. This activity not only enhances students' self-awareness and communication skills but also promotes joy in discovering commonalities and differences, reinforcing a sense of belonging and community in the multicultural classroom. For further context and information for using this activity in pursuit of identity development, see Muhammad's *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*

[7] For more on implementing a growth mindset in your classroom, see Annie Brock and Heather Hundley.

A simple but tangible illustration of this compassionate approach, or extension of grace, is evident in how a teacher handles a student who has fallen asleep in class. Instead of resorting to startling methods like throwing objects or banging on desks, a teacher practicing grace might gently touch the student's shoulder, acknowledge their drowsiness discreetly, and suggest they take a break for a drink of water. Rather than reading the student's behavior as disrespectful, the teacher gives them the benefit of the doubt by recognizing that there are many valid causes for fatigue. The student may have worked a late shift or been caring for younger siblings, etc. And even if the student is only tired because they stayed up late playing video games, approaching them with grace costs me nothing. It does, however, signal to the student that I prioritize their well-being and value an environment conducive to creative and intellectual risk-taking.

Conclusion

In conclusion, centering joy in the classroom through authentic pedagogy, mindfulness, and purpose is essential for creating meaningful, equitable, and fulfilling learning experiences. By fostering genuine connections, educators can move beyond the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and prioritize real-time interactions that nurture student engagement and joy. Authentic pedagogy, grounded in mindfulness and purpose, enhances the sustainability of the teaching profession by promoting self-awareness, presence, and grace. These practices not only support academic achievement but also cultivate a sense of purpose and intrinsic joy in students, encouraging lifelong learning. As demonstrated by educators like Christensen, Hammond, and Muhammad, rigorous academic standards can coexist with a joyful learning environment. By embracing these principles, educators can empower students to navigate the complexities of a diverse and technology-driven world, ultimately contributing to a more just and joyful society.

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Cultivating Joy Through Digital Pleasure Reading: Whose Pleasure Is It Anyway?

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Many English teachers have fond memories of devouring classics and participating in high-level discussions in college seminars led by professors who thoroughly enjoyed deconstructing texts. Love of literature drew many of us to the profession, and we try to replicate our own joyful experiences with reading in our classrooms. For some students, it works. However, many students simply do not connect with the same texts that bring us pleasure. If we focus only—or perhaps even predominantly—on reading that is inaccessible because it is not relevant to their lives, we risk alienating students and contributing to what Kelly Gallagher calls "readicide." Furthermore, as Gallagher points out, English teachers have a bad habit of taking texts that students might find pleasurable and killing their potential for joy with reading guides, quizzes, and teacher-centered activities. Katherine Marsh made a similar claim in a recent *Atlantic* article, "Why Kids Aren't Falling in Love With Reading," arguing that due to the influence of standardized testing, teachers across the grade levels have prioritized close reading activities over those that might generate more pleasure for students.

In short, we might be killing our students' joy of reading in one of two ways: (1) we focus on texts that we love (or that someone who wrote the curriculum loved), rather than on texts that teens find fulfilling, and (2) we make reading "schoolish" (Whitney, p. 55). If our goal is to engage our students in reading that brings pleasure, perhaps we should start by asking, "whose pleasure is it that a particular text invokes?"

Let's reflect for a moment on our own reading experiences. While many English teachers love a particular classic tome, canonical author, or literary time period, there are others among us who prefer nonfiction. Throughout our own education, we were likely assigned texts that felt like a slog (how many of us actually enjoyed *The Iliad*?), and we abandoned them for something more pleasurable. In our current lives, it's likely that many of us read short-form and/or digital texts for pleasure, and some of us may even prefer writing to reading. Even as English majors who teach English, our tastes are varied.

So why is it that when given a choice, we often choose a whole-class text, perhaps one that we ourselves love, and try to inspire joy in every student? Whose pleasure are we actually attending to? English is one of many subjects secondary students engage with during the school day, and very few of the students who enter our classrooms will go on to become English majors, lovers of classic literature. Our role as English

teachers is to prepare adolescents for the literacies they will need beyond the classroom. Our goal is to instill a love of text and learning. To that end, we need to broaden our view of classroom text and value the kinds of real-world texts that bring many teens pleasure. Increasingly, teens read digitally and in many forms. As English teachers, we can cultivate their love of reading in digital spaces, even as we help them to become critical consumers, close readers, and ethical users of digital texts.

Why Digital Texts for Pleasure?

By digital texts, we mean the range of short-, mid-, and longform texts that teens read on screens (Turner and Hicks). These texts may resemble print-based books (e.g., an e-book version of a print book), or they may include elements such as audio, images, video, hyperlinks, and interactive features. In a study of teens' reading practices, Turner and Hicks found that teens read longform texts (e.g., digital books, multimedia journalism), mid-form texts (e.g., blogs, articles, fan-fiction), and short-form texts (e.g., social media posts, messages, search results). Zucker found that teens were more likely to read mid- and short-form texts when reading online for both academic and personal purposes.

Reading for pleasure is often defined in the literature as voluntary reading practices across a range of texts (Cremin). While it can be argued that reading pleasure is a valuable end in and of itself, there's a history of research that correlates pleasure reading with academic achievement (Krashen; Torrpa et al.). Building on this body of work, Wilhelm and Smith studied teens' out-of-school pleasure reading in genres not typically endorsed by schools (e.g., dystopian fiction, romance, horror) and found that teen readers experienced four distinct kinds of pleasure from their reading: "the pleasure of play, intellectual pleasure, social pleasure, and the pleasure of work, both functional work and psychological inner work" (*Reading Unbound* p. 25). To cultivate lifelong reading habits, Wilhelm and Smith argue that teachers should centralize pleasure ("Two Principles"). In this vein, when we conceptualize the ways in which students read for pleasure, we would be remiss to ignore the vast majority of digital reading practices that engage youth on mass scales, including social media texts and digital fiction (Anderson, Faverio, and Gottfried). Through digital texts, we have the opportunity to tap into the varied pleasures that Wilhelm and Smith uncovered.

We know that student choice increases reading motivation (Guthrie and Wigfield). In fact, many adolescents report lower engagement with reading that may result from a disconnect between their interests and the texts assigned in class (Webber et al.). Thus, many English teachers have shifted their curriculum away from whole-class novels towards more student-selected choice texts as independent reading books or literature circle books. Giving our students the autonomy to choose their own texts while providing support to make informed choices can help them select texts that will bring them pleasure.

When they are learning in digital spaces, teens are able to seek out and interact with fellow readers online who share their interests (Ito et al.). In our studies of digital reading, we have found that teens adopted "connected reading" practices, finding new texts of interest to them, engaging with those texts in meaningful ways, and then sharing texts they valued with other readers (Turner and Hicks; Hicks, et al.; Zucker). In fact, recent work has drawn upon literature and reading communities through digital spaces, including Jerasa and Buffone's exploration of BookTok, an online reading community through TikTok, and its parallels to

traditional reading circles often cultivated in ELA classrooms. Through this space, teens are able to create content related to texts on- and offline and engage in digital literacy practices, including discussion, that deepen their understanding of texts while allowing them to explore the digital spaces that permeate their lives.

The features and flexibility of digital texts can make reading more pleasurable. For example, accessibility features such as text-to-speech options, complexity or reading level adjustments, and display options can make a digital text more legible and/or comprehensible than a print version. In our conversations with teens about their digital reading, high school students have often described their appreciation for digital text features such as the ability to search within a text, the ease of accessing a dictionary, and/or the benefits of digital annotation tools such as highlighting or comments (Turner et al.; Zucker).

While changing the curriculum is not a small task, curricular standards may even lend themselves to this type of shift. English curricula may have traditionally been organized around texts or literary time periods or movements; skill-based standards allow English teachers to address those skills through a variety of text types, including digital texts.

Stretching Students' Comfort Zones

As English teachers, we have a responsibility to strengthen comprehension skills across a variety of texts and equip students with the skills they need to navigate society upon graduation. Through exposure to multiple texts, we may also foster a genuine love of reading and learning. One frequently overlooked way this can be accomplished is through the study of digital texts for pleasure. Though teens encounter a range of digital texts in their out-of-school lives, exposure in the classroom may broaden their interests and introduce them to new ideas, increasing their ability to navigate these texts critically and efficiently.

Many educators and parents de-value digital texts, particularly short-form texts found through social media or news bytes, raising concerns about diminished literacy skills and increased screen time. And indeed, digital reading can amount to mindless scrolling, as Nicholas Carr famously argued in *The Shallows* and research has concluded (Annisette and Lafreniere), but it can also present opportunities for teachers to help their students engage more mindfully (Zucker; Turner and Hicks; Hicks). We know that teens read a lot of short-form texts online and are not necessarily evaluating those texts critically (Turner and Hicks; Besharat Mann). Without support for using these texts, shallow reading may increase as students scroll through texts quickly without engaging deeply or critically evaluating. Digital reading provides ample teaching opportunities to help students read more critically, think about misinformation, and notice algorithms. Authentic practice with these skills may help to strengthen deeper reading through short form texts, particularly when coupled with longer form texts in the classroom.

When readers see texts they encounter and engage with outside of school in the classroom, teachers can build upon these texts and challenge students with higher level, more complex texts. Readers are motivated by a certain degree of challenge (Guthrie and Wigfield), but if a text is too difficult, the student might be overwhelmed. Teachers can help students find their reading "sweet spot" with texts that are not too easy and not too hard. For example, we have the "five-finger" method to help young children evaluate the difficulty of a text: ("hold up a finger each time you encounter a word that's too difficult; if you encounter more than five

words on a page, that book is probably too hard"). How can we tell when a digital text is too challenging? Vocabulary is one measure of difficulty, but there are many others. We need explicit instructional strategies to help teen readers metacognitively monitor their digital reading skills and self-select digital texts that are "just right." We offer a few examples of how this might look in an ELA classroom.

Independent Reading via Podcasts

In Lauren Zucker's high school English classroom, students select a podcast to listen to for an independent reading unit. Lauren first introduces students to the genre of the podcast (having learned that most of her students over the years have never listened to a podcast), and then previews a curated selection of podcasts, including many that have been recommended by Lauren's former students. This contemporary "book talk" allows students to think about what topics might interest them. As their first assignment, they listen to the first 15-minutes of three different self-selected podcasts as a sampling before selecting one as their final choice.

Since Lauren may not be familiar with all of the choices and topics, she communicates the details of the assignment in advance, and enlists parents to support their child in their selection of an interesting and appropriate podcast, just as she does when students choose their own books. When a student is finished listening to a particular podcast—when they've completed all of the episodes, or when it is time to move on—Lauren requires that students' subsequent choice reflect a different genre, to encourage students to broaden their interests. In other words, if they listened to *Serial* (which remains the top choice among Lauren's students), they cannot listen to another true crime podcast next.

Ultimately, though, the true goal of this unit is to expose students to a new type of text that they will (hopefully) find pleasurable that might fit into their modern, adult reading lives. When they reflect on this learning, many of Lauren's students have said that they appreciated the flexibility of a podcast and enjoyed listening while working out, waiting for the bus, or completing other homework.

Some may argue that listening to a podcast is not "real reading." In our own research, we found that a majority of our students do not consider any of their reading of digital texts or participation in digital spaces to be "real reading" (Turner and Hicks; Hicks, et al.; Zucker). But research shows that audiobooks and podcasts can promote reading interest and engagement (Best). Despite concerns that "ear reading" an audiobook is inferior to print reading, a recent study demonstrated that listening to an audiobook versus reading the same book in print activated similar regions of the brain (Deniz). Commenting on this study, *School Library Journal* stated, "it means readers worried about taking the easy way out with audiobooks can stop feeling guilty" (Yorio).

Fostering Inquiry With Interest-Based Reading

Jill Stedronsky's middle school students read constantly. Sometimes Jill selects whole-class texts—book chapters, digital articles, videos—and models her own reading before asking her students to dig in. They use a "sparks and starts" journal to document their thinking and response as they read. They use "book thought" journals to capture their response to self-selected books, which they are free to abandon at any time. This reading leads them to inquiry questions, which they explore over the course of the school year, following paths of interest and finding texts that fuel their learning (Stedronsky).

Jill purposefully shares different kinds of texts—TedTalks, podcasts, blogs, infographics—to demonstrate that reading happens in all kinds of spaces and with all kinds of texts. Jill selects texts that can serve as mentor texts for her students, who gather inspiration from these texts and use them to spark their own writing about topics of interest to them. Her students, in turn, find texts that inspire them to keep reading. Jill values all of the texts they bring to the classroom as possibilities for inquiry fueled by passion. They find joy in their reading because it is authentic to their learning and their growth as humans (Stedronsky and Turner).

Making Space for Passion Projects

Both Ivelisse Ramos (high school) and Emilie Jones (middle school), who teach English Language Arts in an urban context, have incorporated "passion projects" (Jones, et al., 44) as full units. Students have the opportunity to research their own interests based on the question, "What am I passionate about? What are problems I want to solve? What do I want to create?" (45). They find that students investigate a variety of topics, reading many different kinds of texts along the way. Most importantly, students shared that the work was "fun" (p. 48).

Kristen Hawley Turner's daughter, Megan, also found joy in reading when her history teacher adopted "20 percent time" (Gonzalez). One class period per week, Megan was allowed to explore her interests. She started reading about audio and video production and created a series of tutorials related to what she learned. Her reading continued well beyond the class and into the next year, when she wrote, recorded, produced, and distributed her own music album. Four years after her teacher allowed her to read what brought her pleasure, she continues to read daily to improve her craft and to connect with others who have similar interests.

Inviting Conversation and Exploration in College Using Digital Texts

Higher education poses a unique space to incorporate digital reading practices, particularly as many universities incorporate digital classroom formats including Moodle and Blackboard to curate classroom resources. Rachel Besharat Mann's undergraduate students engage with a mixture of digital and traditional texts that complement each other both in skill usage and content. Each week students immerse themselves in a particular topic and are provided seminal readings to ground their foundational understanding. Rachel invites students to explore digital commentary on topical ideas to help them gain understanding through multiple perspectives and to bring these voices into class for discussion. For example, in a unit exploring the impact of social media and adolescent mental health, Rachel had students search for commentary across the internet from a variety of sources they typically interact with (including social media itself) to read and bring to class for analysis. Students are encouraged to read user comments and public discourse. The parameters for this exploration were intentionally broad to allow students to use their platforms in ways they wanted to and to place value on texts they encounter regularly.

This type of learning activity gives autonomy to learners and entrusts them to navigate digital spaces authentically, lending value to their digital literacy practices while acknowledging the importance of digital discourse. Students are encouraged to engage in their traditional practices, including spaces where they communicate with others, to center their voices and drive discussion in the classroom. The aim here is to provide an opportunity for joy in this

acknowledgement—giving credence to the practices learners already engage in within the academic context. Students have remarked that these readings feel refreshing compared to denser course texts and appreciate the independence in finding texts they find enjoyable. Students are also encouraged to work together, facilitating the social aspect of reading and including their joyful practices in the conceptualization of reading for class. Social interaction and discussion around relevant texts can foster an appreciation and love for reading, creating a space for joy in typical academic reading tasks (Merga).

How to Incorporate Digital Pleasure Reading

We are not advocating for teachers to do away with print-based texts. And we acknowledge that many teachers are required to cover a certain number or list of texts in a given school year. However, we do see many missed opportunities and places where digital texts can fit naturally into a rich, diverse, and pleasurable English Language Arts curriculum.

For example, units on media, information, and/or digital literacy are natural places to integrate a variety of digital texts. While teachers may look to ELA resources such as Marchetti and O'Dell's *A Teacher's Guide to Mentor Texts* to select digital texts, we can draw upon our students' literacies and cultures by inviting them to share their own digital texts, both as mentor texts and as recommendations for peers. Through exposure to a wide variety of texts, students may identify new text forms and genres to read for pleasure, both in and out of the classroom.

Research and/or inquiry projects that allow students to follow their passions, rather than teacher-designed questions or topics, can lend themselves to the inclusion of a variety of digital texts, including infographics, social media posts, and online videos. Just as teachers might require students to incorporate at least one print source, teachers might also require students to seek out a variety of digital text types related to topics they care about. Content area teachers can model the ways in which they may use digital texts to find information about topics of interest. This scaffold gives learners a sound model for navigating digital spaces while acknowledging the legitimacy of digital texts.

When we picture sustained silent reading, we probably still envision a room of students holding physical books. But as described in the examples above, independent reading can be a time to invite students to read digital texts for pleasure, including those outside of the genres they typically gravitate towards. Educators should take care not to over-police the use of these texts to allow for authentic use of digital spaces and student autonomy.

Avoid Schoolifying Digital Texts

When we invite students to read texts they would select for pleasure outside of our classrooms, we must be careful not to appropriate those texts for activities that undermine that pleasure. We can provide the time and space for pleasure reading to be an end in and of itself.

Many English teachers have walked this fine line by asking students to analyze their favorite song lyrics as poetry. We can spark pleasure by asking students to share a text that is meaningful to them and engage in some light analysis—perhaps selecting and discussing a favorite quote—but we risk snuffing out pleasure if our instructions are too technical or burdensome. Our best course of action is to call attention to the kinds of reading that students do outside of class and value that reading as part of what

we do in class by asking students to reflect on when, how, and why they read.

If we want to engage students in reflective work around their digital pleasure reading, we can ask questions that gently prompt students to practice metacognitive monitoring by thinking about the choices they make as they select and interact with digital texts. Questions such as:

- Where did you find this text?
- Why did you select it?
- What do you think about it? How do you feel when you are reading it, and why?
- In what ways has this text influenced you as a person?
- How would you describe this text to someone else?
- Would you recommend this text to someone else? Why or why not?
- Will you engage with other kinds of texts like this one? Why or why not?
- Where or how might you find similar texts that will bring you joy?

There is still a place in our curriculum for close reading and critical analysis (the types of activities often associated with whole-class texts), but teachers can find their own whole-class digital texts to model and practice those literacy skills. If we are choosing only canonical literature for these whole-class moments, we aren't choosing the kinds of texts that bring the most people joy.

Added Benefits of Digital Pleasure Reading

When we invite students to read digital texts for pleasure in a classroom environment, they are likely to reap some added benefits. For example, we might open up new genres and modes for students to find things that they enjoy reading. As in the podcast classroom example, Lauren's students may realize that the podcast is a genre they enjoy and want to return to in the future. Through students' personal exploration of digital texts, and from witnessing the selections of their peers, students can broaden their reading tastes.

Ongoing practice with digital reading also can boost students' digital literacy skills. Researchers have found that digital reading requires additional literacy skills beyond those required of print texts (Leu et al.) In our research, we found that while many texts are available in both print and digital format, teen readers have context-specific preferences when given a choice between these formats (Zucker and Turner). Teens must practice reading flexibly across contexts and can grow more comfortable reading and annotating in a digital format when given direct instruction for doing so (Hicks, et al.). English teachers can help students cultivate both comfort and pleasure across print and digital contexts.

Exploration of digital texts allows learners to explore online discourse surrounding historical concepts and current events. Recent research has pointed to the contentious spaces that often exist online, particularly through comments and interactions about different topics, that our students are faced with daily (Ortega-Sánchez and Alonso; Garcia and Mirra). Authentic practice within these spaces and student-led analysis of online discourse can help to create life-long learners who engage in these spaces safely and efficiently.

According to Naomi Baron, we are currently engaged in a "new great debate in reading," where we are forced to grapple with the idea of whether text medium — audio, digital, paper, and beyond—matters in reading. Though this debate has implications for a wide range of groups, it is particularly pertinent to English teachers who must decide how to address the proliferation of texts available through non-traditional modalities while meeting the

learning needs of their students.

Finding Pleasure (Again) in English Language Arts

We became English teachers because English Language Arts brings us pleasure. And while we are not training an army of future English majors or English teachers, it is a worthwhile goal to create a learning environment that our students find pleasurable. Creating space for students to develop their interests and interact with texts that bring them joy can help educators to instill a lasting love of learning and text. One way to accomplish this is by making space for digital pleasure reading. Encouraging these practices can expand the definition of reading and legitimate texts for our students and allow them to fully explore the increasingly digital world around them.

This is not to say that the study of classic texts or contemporary novels cannot ignite curiosity, pose a worthwhile challenge, or invite readers to think about the world in a new way. However, digital texts also have the potential to invoke these benefits, and by including them, we might promote more pleasure for a greater number of our students while still supporting their literacy development. It is our hope that through the incorporation of a wide variety of texts for targeted skill instruction and simply for pleasure's sake, English Language Arts class can be pleasurable for all.

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Joyful Learning: Station Rotation Activities in a High School English Class

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"The next novel we will be reading is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Everybody, stand up from your seats and move toward the center of the room. On the SmartBoard, you will see a slide with a statement. If you agree with the statement, you will move to the left side; if you disagree, head over to the right side of the room. Are you ready?"

My juniors nodded eagerly as the screen emitted the statement: "In our society, a college degree from a 'prestigious' university makes you have a higher social status." Seventeen students shuffled over to the left and eight students moved to the right.

I asked, "Who wants to start first?"

Multiple hands sprung up, and Robert* claimed, "I think a college degree is important because it can help with social mobility and increased job opportunities, but I don't think going to a 'prestigious' university makes you *more* socially accepted. You can go to a lesser-known college with a full scholarship instead of having debt at a 'top' college. I would respect the financially responsible person more."

Alicia countered, "*But* if I introduce a random person and say she's a student at Harvard University, you'd be more impressed than if I said she was from some small college in Minnesota. This shows that prestige is important." Students added to the conversation buttressing both Alicia's and Robert's arguments; some of their classmates even switched sides chuckling, "I disagreed with the statement initially, but Alicia made a good point."

For the entire 45-minute period, students shuffled back and forth across the room arguing their opinions for each thematic statement. When I announced that class was over, a few students incredulously looked at the clock and voiced, "Wow, already? This period flew by!"

The Issue: Lack of Joy in the Classroom

Alfie Kohn, an American author and lecturer in the areas of education and human behavior, asserts in his essay "Feel-Bad Education" that "joy has been in short supply in some classrooms because students tend to be regarded not as subjects but as objects, not as learners but as workers." He explains that students are forced to sit through prefabricated lessons in a sterile classroom, whose purpose is not to promote thinking, much less the joy of discovery, but to raise test scores. In other words, richer thinking cannot come from monotonous multiple-choice exams or never-ending worksheets but from "an atmosphere of exuberant discovery" (Kohn). Similarly, Dr. Judy Willis, a board-certified neurologist and classroom teacher, discusses the benefits of joy in the classroom in her essay "The Neuroscience of Joyful Education":

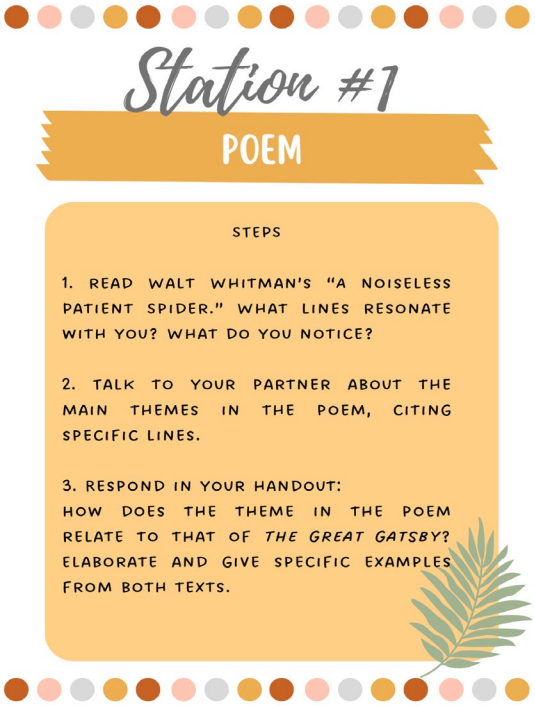
> Lessons that are more stimulating and challenging are more likely to pass through the reticular activating system. When classroom activities are pleasurable, the brain releases dopamine, a neurotransmitter that stimulates the memory centers and promotes the

release of acetylcholine, which increases focused attention.

Ultimately, Dr. Willis contends that when creating lessons, educators should consider novelty, stress-free classrooms, and pleasurable associations linked with learning as these factors lead to more dopamine, focused attention, and enhanced information retention.

Rotation Stations for *The Great Gatsby*

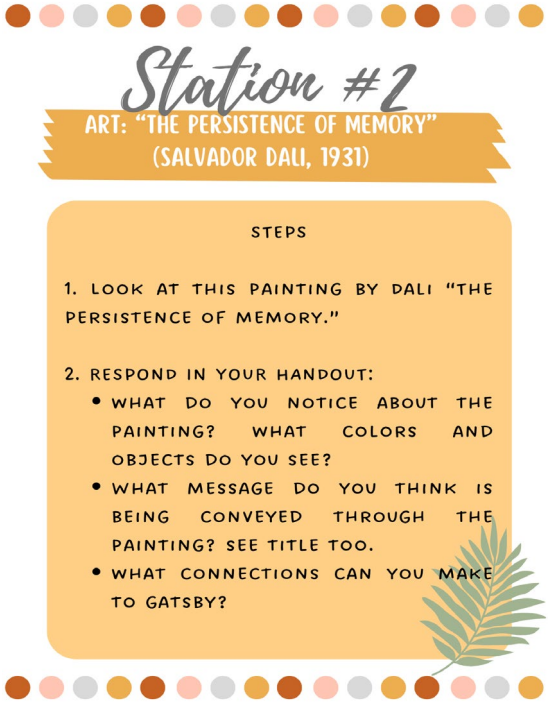
After three weeks, my students had finished reading *The Great Gatsby*, and I had planned a rotation station lesson. Rather than listening to the teacher lecture for 45 minutes in rows and columns, I wanted my juniors to move around, collaborate, and learn from their peers as they did with the thematic debate at the start of the unit. Mina Gavell, a seasoned teacher, discusses how task-based reading activities, such as rotation stations, create "a student-centered class with many opportunities for communication because as students are working in pairs, they offer support to one another and negotiate answers." In addition, station activities "provide the extrinsic push—after all, it is a class assignment—but also sets up an environment for intrinsic motivation in the form of a fun and interactive activity […] thereby setting themselves up for greater success and a sense of accomplishment" (Gavell 3). In creating this lesson, my objective was for students to be stimulated and engaged throughout the entire lesson while gaining new insights about *The Great Gatsby*. I assembled five stations of diverse activities and set the timer for eight minutes each. Students were strategically put into pairs with one handout for their responses; two-three pairs were then dispersed to different stations and rotated clockwise.



Station 1: Walt Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider"

In station 1, students read Walt Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider." Their task was to determine the poem's meaning then eventually make text-to-text connections. When students were stuck, I scaffolded by asking the following questions: *What might the speaker mean in the last few lines when he mentions 'seeking the spheres to connect them'? What might be the 'gossamer thread' that Gatsby 'tirelessly tries to fling'? How is Gatsby also 'isolated' and 'detached' from the group he wants to be part of?*

Most students started talking right away, mentioning topics of loneliness and the importance of meaningful relationships. For example, Silvia and Jessica discussed, "I think the theme could be about isolation. The spider is alone and 'surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space.' It reminds me of Gatsby because regardless of how many people showed up to his parties to relish in his wealth, in the end, no one



showed up when it truly mattered—at his funeral—despite how many calls were made. They're both alone and neglected." Another pair, Casey and Miriam, added to the conversation, "The spider is trying to build its web 'launch[ing] forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself, ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them' and seeks connection. This is similar to Gatsby's discipline and drive in trying to attain his goal of being with Daisy in her world of East Egg." As students wrapped up this station and jotted down their final interpretations, they gave each other high-fives saying, "Good job!"

Station 2: Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory"

In station 2, students looked at Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory" and used visual thinking strategies to analyze the painting. Students made observations about the painting by responding to these questions: *What's going on in this picture? What do you notice that makes you say that? What more can you find?*

Jacob started, "The landscape is barren. There's a cliff, a tree with only branches, and a lot of clocks. The clocks are melting or warped. I know Dali is known for surrealism. What is that fleshy thing? Is that an eyelash?"

Mary proposed, "Maybe the repeated image of clocks symbolizes something about time? Oh! The title is 'The Persistence of Memory.' So could the painting be about time and memory?"

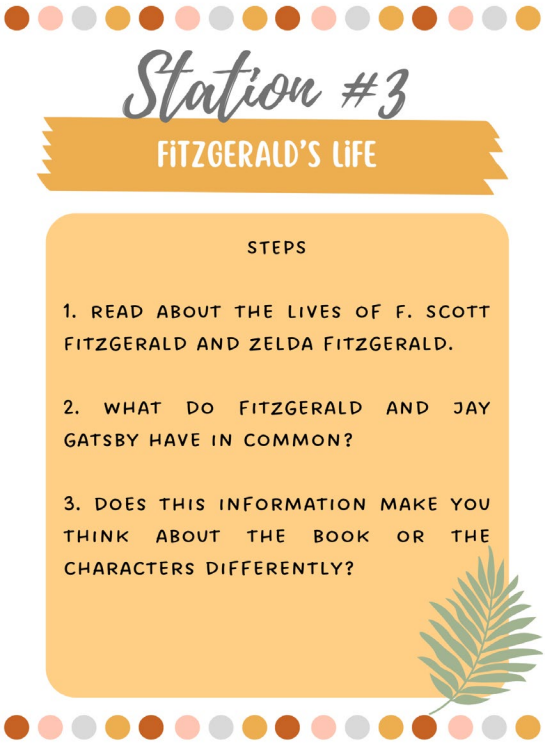
Jacob replied, "Ants…melting clocks…surrealism…memory. Maybe it conveys the idea that memories persist but can change over time; memories become distorted or warped."

Esther shared, "I think the drooping clocks symbolize that time isn't real here or that it fades. Wait, all the clocks show the same time; time is frozen."

Mary had an epiphany: "In *The Great Gatsby*, time is relative. Gatsby is stuck in the past and to him, it doesn't matter that five years have passed. He remembers every tiny detail of Daisy. Even though Gatsby is persistent in thinking that Daisy is still the same girl he fell for, she's married to Tom now. The painting shows a vast empty land; it's kind of like the emptiness of Gatsby's life. Gatsby only focused on Daisy, but she betrayed him and didn't even attend his funeral." As opposed to a solitary reader response paragraph, peer learning and exposure to diverse perspectives through a small group discussion led to higher engagement, improved communication skills, and an enhanced understanding of both the painting and story.

Station 3: Fitzgerald's Biography

In station 3, students briefly read over Fitzgerald's biography and were asked to make connections between the author's life and Gatsby's. As one partner read the printed article, the other continued to jot down facts about the author's life.



"It seems that both the author and Jay Gatsby believed that if they became wealthy, they could get 'the girl' and live happily ever after. Zelda broke off their engagement because of Scott Fitzgerald's paltry salary and only married him after he published *This Side of Paradise.* Likewise, Gatsby was only able to gain Daisy's attention by pretending to be on the same stratum as her. He gave her a false sense of security until he became rich," David said.

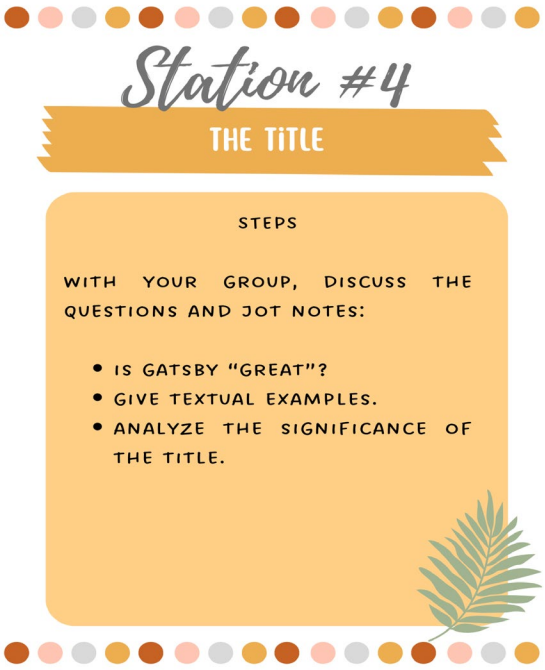
"Both Gatsby and Fitzgerald enlisted in the army. The story takes place in the Roaring Twenties, and Fitzgerald includes his own life experiences from 1920s. They both have downfalls too; the author falls victim to alcoholism then dies of a heart attack, and Gatsby is shot by Wilson and becomes the scapegoat for all the crimes," Kayla noted.

David replied, "Wow. Fitzgerald literally is Gatsby. His wealth didn't provide him with happiness, and he struggled with issues in his life." This station activity was much more impactful than a teacher lecturing and students memorizing facts; discovery learning allowed them to take on a more active role in making meaning and text-to-text connections.

Station 4: The Significance of the Title

In station 4, students read a quote taken from *The Great Gatsby* and discussed the following questions: *Why do you think the title is called The Great Gatsby? In your opinion, is Gatsby "great"? Does this "greatness" provide him with what he wants?* Similar to the pre-reading activity where students had to agree or disagree with thematic statements, in this activity, students enjoyed debating their perspectives on why they thought the title was misleading or accurate.

For example, Anna and Nathan argued, "The title is deceiving, and we don't think Gatsby is great. He had no meaningful relationships as seen with the lack of attendance at his funeral. He was just a man who threw parties for an unachieved goal."



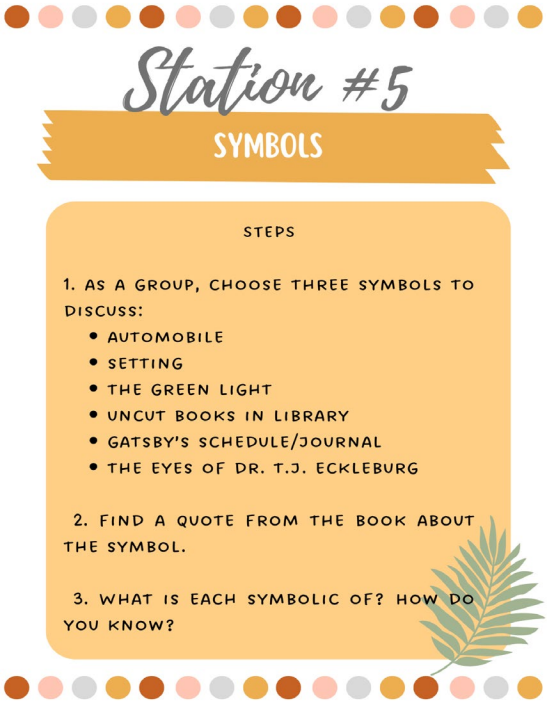
Gloria counterargued, "Gatsby is 'great' because even though he couldn't be with Daisy, his rags-to-riches story and

'extraordinary gift for hope' are quite rare and admirable. He stayed dedicated to the 'promises of life' and his dream like an 'intricate machine.' He never strayed from his goal, which makes him 'great.'"

Nathan jumped back in: "Rags-to-riches, yes, but he lived a corrupt lifestyle and made his money illegally working with Wolfsheim! How can you say he's 'great'?"

Taylor supported Gloria: "He turned his entire life around, starting as a poor clam digger and salmon fisher to becoming this illustrious and wealthy man. It shows the depths of his perseverance and optimism."

This station buzzed with their zealous opinions on their perspectives of whether Gatsby deserved to be called "great." In this station, students listened to diverse opinions, which led to cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance "facilitates the cognitive processes of accommodation and assimilation, which are central to knowledge development; learners are presented with new knowledge and must expend mental effort to integrate this information into their existing schema" (Adcock). Students were encouraged to think more deeply, and the process strengthened their critical thinking skills and metacognitive abilities.



Station 5: Symbolism

Copies of *The Great Gatsby* were scattered on the desks along with six images of symbols to analyze. Tiffany and Evan wrote about automobiles in the story: "Automobiles represent the carelessness of the people in the Roaring Twenties. For instance, Owl Eyes was involved in a car accident after Gatsby's party. Tom Buchanan was caught with a chambermaid after a car accident. Daisy killed Myrtle while driving. People were drinking and driving. Cars are a symbol for destruction and the drivers' reckless behaviors."

Teresa and Anastasia discussed the green light at the end of Daisy's dock: "Oh, this is a good quote. 'Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us.' He was optimistic about his American dream to the very end—the one with Daisy and the old money world she lives in—but it was beyond his grasp."

Sarah and Alicia explained the symbolism of the uncut book in Gatsby's library: "This is a good quote about the uncut books: 'It's a bona-fide piece of printed matter. This fella's a regular Belasco. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop too—didn't cut the pages!' Owl Eyes also says that if one book is removed from the shelf, the whole library would collapse. Everything Gatsby does or says is a facade; he wants to depict himself as someone intelligent and well-read, but he hasn't ever read these books. They're all for show; he's a fraud." Students continued to revisit the novel, work together to find quotes, analyze, and discuss the significance of the symbols they chose. In this station, symbolism was an accessible vantage point for students to analyze.

Student Reflections: "That was fun!"

When the period was over, Helen repeated to her group and me, "This was so fun! Every station was creative and interactive. I liked how we got to talk to our partners and hear all the different thoughts people had about the same topic. Can we do this again with our next book?" I asked students to write a reflection to assess their engagement with the station activities and see what their takeaways were. They responded to the following questions: *What was your favorite and least favorite station? Discuss your experience collaborating with your partner and group. What new information did you learn from this activity that might've enhanced your understanding of The Great Gatsby?*

Robert wrote, "This activity was fun because it wasn't all work, and I got to share my ideas with everyone. My favorite station was the painting one because it was creative, and we all had different ideas about its meaning. If I had to answer the questions alone, then I wouldn't have learned or seen multiple insights that people had about the artwork." Alicia agreed: "It was interesting to pinpoint the little details in the painting, find meaning, and make connections among the painting, book, and our lives. We talked about the volatility of time and memories." In addition to the "The Persistence of Memory" station, many students enjoyed station 4, in which they discussed whether Gatsby is "great." Rishi shared, "This station was enjoyable because while we had various opinions, we concluded that Gatsby is inspirational because of his optimism and determination in chasing after his dream." Jose added, "I liked that station too because everyone in my group had a different idea of what 'greatness' means, and I got to see how many people besides myself admired Gatsby just as I did." Furthermore, I also learned that students enjoyed station 3. Esther explained, "Station 3 was my favorite because we looked into Fitzgerald and Zelda's lives, and I saw how much of Fitzgerald's life was like Gatsby's." Javit added, "Station 3 enhanced my understanding of *The Great Gatsby* because it showed me that while Fitzgerald and Gatsby obtained their goals of becoming wealthy, money didn't buy complete happiness." Olivia concluded, "Even though I dislike biographies, I liked reading about Fitzgerald and how the author included personal moments from his life into his writing. It made the story more meaningful."

What I found amusing was how diverse the answers were when it came to students' most and least favorite stations. For instance, while some students raved about how much they enjoyed the art station since "meaning doesn't come only from text but also visuals," others voiced that this was their least favorite "because it was difficult to interpret what the image meant and there wasn't a clear and objective answer." Furthermore, while some students shared that they liked the symbols station because "symbols reveal a lot about the book's themes, and it was rewarding identifying the symbols, such as the repeated car accidents," others expressed, "it was difficult to find a quote and analyze the symbols' meanings." In addition, some students mentioned, "It's difficult to say what [their] favorite station was, because each allowed [them] to see the bigger picture of the book and served a purpose."

My Takeaways: What Does Joyful Learning Look Like?

My takeaway from the whole class discussion and student reflections was that my juniors found pleasure in collaborating with a partner and other pairs in the station because "diverse ideas were being exchanged, which allowed them to look at the topic and the story in a novel way." Students voiced that they were engaged the

entire time because they were "bouncing off each other's ideas" and the conversation felt "safe and comfortable" even though their opinions differed. They concluded that the station rotation activities were interactive and fun just like the pre-reading debate we started the *The Great Gatsby* unit with because instead of just sitting in columns and rows and completing worksheets, they got to move around the room and participate in tasks together. Learning stations helped to foster student engagement and made my students into active rather than passive learners. In fact, hands-on exercises and activities promoted social involvement among students, leading to cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement (Purinton and Burke 134). Because of this increased engagement and diverse task-based activities, students felt a sense of satisfaction and pleasure, especially when they discovered and constructed the text's meaning as a team. While rotation stations take meticulous planning and preparation, they are beneficial, even in a high school setting, in creating joyful student-based discussions and preventing redundant and mundane instruction and assessments. Ultimately, by reducing the number of solitary assessments—like multiple-choice and open-ended quizzes to test the students' knowledge of a book—and replacing them with stimulating and engaging lessons—such as rotation stations that focus on student-led learning, collaboration, diverse task-based activities, and movement—teachers can instill joyful teaching and cease those moments of students begrudgingly counting down the minutes until class is over.

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Prose Poem With a Timer Set

OONA M. ABRAMS
Millburn Township School District

In my imagination lives another poet, much, much younger than myself who sits on some sepia-edged corner sipping coffee and nibbling a chocolate pastry (minus the crumbs because those are not very poetic). This poet has long, shiny brunette hair like the women in Pantene commercials and a moleskin notebook with impressionist painting on the cover. This poet has no obligations, no children, is supported by a rich, elderly, feminist philanthropist who wants more poets in the world who are given time and space to compose. This poet is a ghost, I know, I know, and instead here I sit with a dollar store notebook and ballpoint pen, bundled up in a fleece blanket and sweatshirt and socks because the heat is turned off thanks to spring being here. Before the kids wake up I wonder if by the time I finish writing this and typing it up, evening out the lines, deciding on punctuation, will there be time to put in those hot rollers I plug in so many mornings only to unplug later? Will there be time after all the sandwich making and cereal bowl supervision and toothbrushing reminders to apply some makeup, or will that bag that comes out every morning get shoved away too? This much I do have in common with that ghost of a poetess: We sip our coffee and wear a uniform of mostly dark colors each day, want more poetry in this life which I guess makes us our own philanthropists who donate time and talent instead of treasure, wish we could spend our time more wisely doing what we love, what matters most, putting pen to paper, loving the people in our lives, breathing in this cool air presently. Noticing things.

OONA MARIE ABRAMS (@oonziela) is the Director of English Language Arts in Millburn Township, New Jersey. Her writing has been published in *English Leadership Quarterly*, *Educational Leadership*, *Educational Viewpoints*, and various educational blogs. She is an active member of NCTE, the Council on English Leadership and New Jersey Council of Teachers of English.

To the Middle School Talent Show Kids

OONA M. ABRAMS
Millburn Township School District

Hey, middle school talent show kids – yeah, all of you
All of you who showed up and got up and stayed up
Has anyone told you yet that you are one collective miracle?

To the kid who sang "A Million Dreams" alone after a group sang it too
To the soloists whose voices shook and cracked or went off key
(Stop replaying it in your head: You showed up, got up, stayed up!)

To the dude who spun a pen in rhythm to The Weeknd,
To the hula-hooping girl in the emerald green dress and ruby slippers,
To the most talented vocalist who said no to a solo and yes to the ensemble,
To the kid who stuck out the tech glitch till the electric guitar got hooked up,
To the songwriter who donned taffeta and invited two friends to sing and play,
To the comic duet whose skit had so many insider jokes, if you know you know,
To the proud ladies rocking accordion polkas and otamatone Imperial Marches,
To the petite trio of synchronized, purple tank-topped, black-legginged dancers,
To the trumpeter who blasted that *Lion King* song from the world's oldest folding chair,

All of you middle school talent show kids who showed up and got up and stayed up:
I promise, if you could do this, here, now, tonight, anything is possible for you. Anything.

So fly that hula hoop up to the moon, sell out Madison Square Garden,
Make a sales pitch to the firm's top client, organize that PTA 5K,
Spin that pen into poems and take that stage at the Second City,
Push all the buttons and pull all the levers it takes to cure cancer,
Dress taffeta-clad mannequins in every window of every storefront,
Feed everyone who is hungry today, or might be hungry tomorrow,

Sing lullabies to your children, grandchildren, great grandchildren,

Because, this, The Middle School Talent Show, makes you *audacious.*

You showed up, you got up, you stayed up, and that makes you

One

Collective

Miracle

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Trying to Read a Poem Written in Invisible Ink

BILL MEISSNER
St. Cloud State University

The page is blank, and you can't see any
words, but you try to imagine them.

If you could only read them, for a moment
you might see the mountains of Nepal,
or the curved shorelines of distant oceans.
You might actually taste
the rare, cool air, or embrace the sand between your toes.

If you could only read them,
you know the words would
draw you in. Perhaps they'd describe
a face, the touch of a hand, an embrace pulling you closer.
Words so intense they will make you
inhale a quick breath, or make you
stop breathing for a moment.

If only you could read them, you might imagine
drifting on a boat made of flowers, staring at
the scarlet horizon at the solstice, or that you have
a whole azure ocean inside you. The words buoy you;
swim in them as long as you can.

The poem's final words beckon you even more,
so you lean so close
that your lips almost touch them.
You can feel the page about to give you a

a paper cut, or a kiss.

You finally understand that the poem loves you,
and you love the poem.
And if you hold the blank paper over a flame,
the way you would hold your first love letter,
you will finally know it by heart.

Where the Poems Find You

BILL MEISSNER
St. Cloud State University

We don't realize they're nearby, but they are:
they might be waiting
in the darkness of coffee grounds
we stare at in the numb morning,
between the yellowed pages of magazines,
hiding on the key ring to a house we used to own,
or in the closet beneath the lost sock
that no longer dreams of dancing.

They're always just outside the door
like a car we didn't know we owned, willing to take us
to a destination that can't be found on any map.
We drive to a landscape of dreams
that seems to be dreaming us:
a meadow dotted with the yellow flowers of stars,
wings of a thousand birds swimming across
the blue pool of the sky,
while, on the horizon, the eye of the
sun opens steadily,
like the first word we're about to write.

The Adolescent Poetic Experience as Supported by a Teacher/Poet's Heartfelt Empathy

JOSEPH S. PIZZO
New Jersey Council of Teachers of English

Joined in a mission to create original poetry–
mature vision blended with youthful angst,
we negotiate a path

Of discoveries and disappointments, desires
and distinctions. Explosions of energy and excitement
buoyed by support and safety–

consideration and consternation replaced by
observations and opinions–encouragement
dampening criticism

Ideas generated with playfulness and perception:
Peaches blossoming into golden orbs bursting with nectar
Clouds transformed into floating mountains of lighthearted ballerinas

Simple smiles healing troubled hearts,
soothing comfort through the beat of reassuring
rhythms, metaphors, and personification.

Delicate fingers crafting selections–
keyboards invite mélanges of explorations–
wafting breezes accenting fields of dahlias,

eyes discovering serene hues and melodies,
familiar friends offering havens during emotional storms
of lost friendships and compromised promises.

Safety secured and risk insulated,
poetic patterns providing precise escape
through mysterious haze:

language challenging meaning,
specificity and sincerity.
Encouragement through perseverance,

discouragement of distress,
youth engulfed in emerging emotions, descriptions
desiring clarity, sound pursuing sense,

unbridled energy countered by academic control,
intention pursuing meaning, instinct pursuing vision–
words waiting to be spoken, words

needing to be spoken, words requiring
voice, honesty, integrity, personality, individual
Intention. Sincerity with extended hands,

smiles of support, permission to seek adventure
and discover. Experienced expectations
thwarting dissonance, challenges replaced

by support through sincerity
In this instruction defined
by partnership and production

JOSEPH S. PIZZO is a 7th-grade integrated language arts teacher at the Black River Middle School in Chester and an adjunct professor of writing at Centenary University in Hackettstown. In his 51st year of teaching middle school and 32nd year at the university level, Joe constantly reinvents his best practices to stay current in his field while being a writer who teaches writing, a PD workshop provider, and a podcaster who features authors, middle level books, and issues (https://www.youtube.com/@josephpizzo2357). He can be reached at joseph.pizzo@chester-nj.org.