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## This is About Us: Drama Workshop as Patriotic Education

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# This Is About Us: Drama Education as Patriotic Education

*Samuel J. Tanner*

For 15 years, I was a drama teacher in two large urban high schools in Minnesota. My classes were designed with the belief that theatre requires the downplaying or even sacrifice of the individual for the success of the collective. Yes, these classes involved practices that helped students rehearse basic tools of performance but, more importantly, they required participants to work together as a group. Each semester-long class ended with a theatrical production written, produced, and performed by the students for audiences of their peers. Careful not to impose my vision on the content of their productions, I worked to facilitate open-ended playbuilding, which is a complex process by which people collaborate to consider a concept through the creation of a dramatic production (Norris, 2009).

In this piece, I invite readers to consider that preparing students to embrace the potentials of democratic patriotism goes beyond the purview of social studies education and should be part of how students and teachers interact with one another across disciplines. Westheimer (2006) argues that “caring about the substantive values that underlie American democracy is the hallmark of democratic patriotism” (p. 612). Among these values are freedom of speech, protection of civil liberties, high participation in governance, and working for social and economic equality.

In what follows, I trace aspects of democratic values from my experience of working with a drama class of high school students who created and performed a play entitled *Yes, Even Him*. This production tells the story of a gay high school student named Matthew who struggles with growing self-hatred. I argue that although some students were hesitant and even resistant to engage the subject chosen by the class, my pedagogical approach created space in which group members connected and worked together successfully in spite of, and even because of, their differences. I worked deliberately to foster their ability, as a diverse and sometimes contentious group of people, to support each other. This productive collaboration developed into students’ willingness to practice empathetic care as they worked with differences that were often deeply felt. Students became willing to embrace an us that transcended individual differences to express loyalty, love, and connection to the group. What took place was democratic, patriotic education.

To be clear, there was no talk of democracy or patriotism in the class. Although I recognize the value of explicitly connecting the work we did to larger cultural and social issues—particularly in the face of growing and dangerous partisan divides in the United States—in this piece I step back to consider how members of this class practiced certain dispositions that led to an experiential encounter with democratic patriotism in practice. I argue that this kind of patriotism is a doing; it is a way of being in the world. Democratic patriotism is not just about love of country; it is about working in a community for the betterment of all (Kissling, 2016; Westheimer, 2006). This story is an example of just that—working to explore and push boundaries within a community with differences. It is not focused on nation-state patriotism but on

patriotism at the lived daily level, akin to Dewey's (1916/2011) notion that democracy is "more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 101). My students shared and communicated a uniquely democratic experience in their work in creating and performing *Yes, Even Him* for a larger audience of their high school peers.

Following Kissling (2015), this story is also an example of how confronting controversial issues in classrooms, rather than passively accepting passionate nationalistic rhetoric, is crucial in presenting and engaging students in democratic, patriotic education. The choice in 2011—when this class took place—to write a play about a gay high school student was a risk in many ways. Debates around LGBTQ issues continue to be contentious. Civil (and often uncivil) discourse includes discussions of gender-neutral bathrooms, gay marriage, and civil rights for gender-nonconforming people. Indeed, while the Twin Cities are often considered progressive, gay students in this high school, including Aaron and Mark<sup>1</sup>, whom we will meet later, expressed how uncomfortable they were talking about their sexual identity in school. Aaron and Mark routinely remarked that our drama class was unique because it felt acceptable to openly talk there about being gay. As we will see, other students, including Marcus and Allen, did not hide the fact that, for personal and/or religious reasons, they found gay sexuality to be objectionable. For the benefit of themselves, their peers, and their school, Aaron, Mark, and their classmates learned to work through their sometimes profound and contentious differences related to gay rights and acceptance of gay individuals. Not all of the students embraced gay rights by the end of the play. Indeed, democracy does not and cannot require uniform consensus. It does, however, require us to embrace the often messy and contentious experience of dialoging with difference or even controversy and of maintaining relations with other members of our community.

This article relies on a narrative approach to educational research (Barone, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Jacobs, 2005; Lensmire et al., 2013; Moen, 2006) to both present and consider the playbuilding pedagogy experienced by students in my high school drama class in the fall of 2011. *Yes, Even Him* was a script that 32 ninth- to twelfth-grade students wrote, produced, and performed for audiences of their peers. Their work was the result of a playbuilding sequence in a section of a drama workshop at Primville Area High School (PAHS), a large urban high school in the Twin Cities. I used methods of ethnographic teacher-research to document this process (Lensmire, 1994). As their teacher, I facilitated the experience, paying special attention to the democratic process that resulted, somewhat surprisingly, in the *Yes, Even Him* project.

## **Drama Workshop**

I'd been teaching for nearly 10 years by the time I worked with the students who produced *Yes, Even Him*. I worked with this group of freshmen through seniors for one semester in an elective course, Drama Workshop, at PAHS. My drama classes attracted a diverse group of students who often did not interact in other spaces in the school.

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1 All names of people and of the school are pseudonyms.

Drama Workshop had three distinct phases. In the first month, I taught basic acting skills and used drama pedagogy to create a disciplined, collaborative ethos in the class. I gradually ceded responsibility to the group during the second month as they made drama together. Finally, I gave them a great measure of collective autonomy in the third month as they created and produced a play. Making these careful shifts in the class arose out of frustrations I'd experienced earlier in my career. Students were almost always eager to be creative and autonomous as they made theatre in my elective courses. Still, I'd learned that students required a disciplined context as well as collaborative dispositional ways of being if they were going to work together without things descending into contentious chaos. Indeed, playbuilding is unruly, and a much different approach to making drama than staging a production of, for example, *Romeo and Juliet* or *Legally Blonde*. Students don't follow the will of the director or teacher when they playbuild; instead, they create and express content together. Certainly, not all of my classes embraced the togetherness I tried to foster in Drama Workshop, and most did not take up controversial subjects in their productions. The group described below enthusiastically embraced the idea that we were a community, and their capacity for togetherness resulted in *Yes, Even Him*.

I led a directive warm-up during each day of class throughout the semester. It was an exercise in becoming blank, in letting go of the selves and the preoccupations that students brought into the room. Students stood in front of the stage, closed their eyes, and breathed deeply three times. I asked them to imagine and practice erasing the inward and outward characteristics of the characters they played in their everyday lives. Next, I led them through vocal and physical warm-ups. This routine ended with a call and response.

"This," I said, projecting my voice loudly across the auditorium.

"Is not about me," students shouted loudly.

I told them that we were warming up our bodies and voices for the work of creating theatre. This was true. But, more importantly, each day I was reminding them through embodied practices that they would succeed or fail as a group, not as individuals. I didn't want the racial, socioeconomic, gendered, and ideological differences that separated students in their everyday lives to disrupt the togetherness I knew was necessary for us to make drama together. My intention was for students to make theatre, but in looking back, I see now that my routine was also an impetus for students to practice emptying themselves of the selves they brought into the room. At the very least, these warm-ups prepared my drama class for the contentious work of making collaborative theatre and, eventually, building a play together.

After warm-ups during that first month, I gave students performance tasks. These performances were always born out of collaboration and support from their peers. For instance, students each selected, rehearsed, and performed a solo acting performance—a monologue—at the beginning of the course. To prepare these monologues, I had them spend a week in a monologue-practice group that was facilitated by a student in the class. I selected group leaders who I thought would bring their groups together.

Vanessa, Aaron, Mark, and Robby—all students who later played an important part in the creation of *Yes, Even Him*—were selected as monologue group leaders. Vanessa was a senior. She was Black, Christian, a

popular student in the high school, and a star on the school's basketball team. I mention Vanessa's race because PAHS was a predominately White high school. Still, there were six Black students in this section of Drama Workshop. Further, Vanessa's religious beliefs became an important factor in the group's interactions as they moved into a discussion of sexuality. Aaron was a freshman and had been very open during the class about being gay. The monologue he performed during the first month was even about coming out to his parents. Mark was a sophomore who was also vocal about being gay. Like Vanessa, Robby was a senior athlete. He was very popular and considered a class clown. He took Drama Workshop because, in his words, he wanted to make a fool of himself in front of his friends.

I met with each of these group leaders after warm-ups, before each of their monologue-group facilitations, and coached them on how to work with their small groups. Then I gave them the hour to work through a series of assigned tasks with their groups. This was an efficient way to help students rehearse their monologues, but mostly I did this in order to model ways of being that inspired autonomy beyond the scope of my authority and ask students to practice them. Further, students connected with each other in these groups by telling stories, helping each other select monologues, and practicing together. Eventually, students supported each other through the stressful, often anxious work of performing monologues in front of the class. Our collaborative work continued as students next worked to create short dramatic scenes. Finally, each of the four group leaders was assigned a small group that built a 20-minute piece of theatre—a short play—using only random words generated at the start of the assignments. Members of the class were impressed by what the groups created.

"I can't believe how good these plays were, Mr. Tanner," Connor, a sophomore, said during a reflective discussion in class after the performances. "We kick ass."

Connor was on the autism spectrum. Other teachers warned me that he would constantly disrupt my class. His sense of humor was crude, to be sure, but he never disturbed our group processes. In fact, Connor's assigned aide, James, who was with him at all times throughout the school day, told me that he had never seen Connor so focused in a class.

"There's something special about this class, Mr. Tanner," James told me one afternoon as we watched the students work. "Connor loves it. This is the only class he actually cares about."

I credited Connor's engagement to teaching practices that created autonomous, empathetic peer groups that supported the vulnerable work of creating theatre together. Students in special education often thrived in my drama classes, so I was unsurprised by Connor's comment during our discussion. Regardless of the quality of their work, most students in my classes were proud of what they created there. They had made something together, and we celebrated that act as much as the actual product.

"Drama is like basketball," Vanessa said during the same discussion about the creation of our short plays. "It's about the team, not the individual. I get it. I'm a point guard."

I laughed with Vanessa. I was a (bad) point guard too.

“We’re making good drama because we’re playing good basketball, Mr. Tanner. We know we need to do this work together. We’re a family.”

I was surprised by the enthusiasm of Vanessa’s comment, but not so much by the spirit. Indeed, I was trying to make members of the class feel that we were a family, especially as I knew that we would need to build a play together. Although I had no idea at this point about the challenging content the group would choose for the play, I knew that togetherness was key to working with the vulnerability that public performance entails. Building empathy and connection was something I’d done with countless groups by the time I met Vanessa’s class; outside of Drama Workshop, there’d be little reason for Connor and Vanessa to interact, let alone celebrate each other’s work.

As we moved into the final phase of the class, students sat in a circle on stage and discussed potential concepts for their play. I observed from the first row of the auditorium. I’d learned that it was important to physically remove myself from the group so they’d make decisions without looking to me to provide answers. I wanted the group to practice largely autonomous collaboration as they discussed possible ideas for a play—in other words, as they engaged in democratic process.

“We should write a play about race,” Vanessa said early on in the discussion. She laughed. “Race is all jacked up in this school. We should write a play about an interracial couple. You know, like *Romeo and Juliet*.”

Many of the students in the circle nodded to express agreement.

“We should write a play about sexual orientation,” Aaron said. “I’ve felt comfortable talking about being gay in this class. We should explore that.”

“This is the only class I’ve ever felt comfortable talking about being gay,” Mark said in agreement with Aaron. “We could definitely write about that.”

At this point, I saw Marcus look at his friend Allen. Marcus rolled his eyes. Both were seniors. They were the only two people in the class who seemed irritated when Aaron and Mark talked about being gay. Although they got along and worked well with Aaron and Mark, Allen and Marcus both identified as straight and were quick to point this out when the group talked about doing a play about being gay.

“I’m straight,” Marcus told the group. “I don’t know if I want to do a play about being gay. It would be embarrassing, you know?”

Allen nodded adamantly.

“I like it because we’re still talking about oppression,” Vanessa said. “I want to do a play about race, but I have to remember this isn’t about me.”

The conversation grew more intense. It was clear that Marcus, Allen, and a few other classmates didn't want to participate in a play about being gay. Ultimately, the class agreed that, either way, they wanted to explore oppression in their play—whether the script was about race or sexuality. Eventually, as the bell rang, the group decided—perhaps because Vanessa, Aaron, Robby, and Mark had been the leaders I had selected earlier in the class—that those four would be the lead writers. Marcus and Allen were skeptical of this choice, but the consensus in the discussion outweighed their expressed doubts. Vanessa, Aaron, Robby, and Mark agreed to meet in a coffee shop after school to begin planning a potential outline for our script. It was not uncommon for students to meet outside of class to work on their plays for Drama Workshop. The approach to drama pedagogy I've described above, giving autonomy to the group, often led to radical student engagement. Again, students often seemed to care for and about our class.

The four lead writers came back with a potential outline for a play the next day. The majority of the group agreed to proceed with a play about sexual identity. Marcus and Allen were opposed to the idea. The class broke up into small groups to start working on writing scenes over the next week. Each member of the class contributed to the script. Marcus and Allen weren't enthusiastic about the play, but each of them participated in writing the scenes. Vanessa, Aaron, Robby, and Mark met at a coffee shop after school again to make final revisions of the play. Students sat in a circle the next day and read the script aloud.

I was careful not to directly involve myself in the group's process. Still, Marcus and Allen approached me after reading the final version of the script.

"A play about being gay, Mr. Tanner?" Allen asked hesitantly.

"I don't know," Marcus told me. "I don't think I want to do this."

"I'm straight. I don't think it's right to be gay," Allen said.

"There are plenty of roles in this play for straight characters," I told them. "The challenge of acting is pretending to be somebody else. That's still the work here. This is what the class decided to create."

"This isn't about me," Marcus said, with a trace of sarcasm. "It's about us."

I laughed.

Marcus' sarcasm signaled that he wasn't happy with the decision, but the statement told me he had decided to go along with it. This double marking—participating and distancing himself—was a strategy he used throughout the rest of the semester.

Marcus and Allen seemed skeptical as they left class.

Vanessa and Aaron stood nearby during my encounter with Marcus and Allen. "They'll come around, Mr. Tanner," Aaron told me with a smile. "This is going to be a really good play. It's just hard for Marcus and Allen to talk about being gay. They're not bad people."



“We got this, Mr. Tanner,” Vanessa said. “I’m Christian, so I don’t know about being gay or whatever. But we’ll do this together. Aaron’s my boy.”

Aaron laughed.

The group spent the remainder of the course creating, rehearsing, and performing *Yes, Even Him*. Marcus and Allen were hesitant, but they continued to participate daily. Eventually, they were cast to play characters from the video game *Mortal Kombat*. Connor was also cast as one of these characters and, as rehearsals for the production were underway, the three boys relished the opportunity to choreograph karate moves.

In the brief narrative of the first phase of our class, I sought to describe my use of a set of pedagogic practices designed to create an environment of civil discourse. It is perhaps ironic that I imposed a set of disciplined drama practices to promote a powerful experience of democratic patriotism. I argue that my students developed their capacities to care about democratic values as they engaged in the processes of doing warm-up exercises, crafting and performing monologues, and then writing, staging, rehearsing, and performing a play.

Practicing democracy across difference is unruly and challenging. The topic of sexual identity this class ultimately took up was exciting for some, challenging for most, and alienating for a few, simultaneously giving rise to hope, joy, fear, resistance, and anger. My teaching was deliberately designed so that students would negotiate these responses by practicing civil discourse throughout the process of the class, by which I mean learning how to talk with one another, be together, and work collectively in productive relation to their differences, many of which stemmed from diverse religious, racial, sexual, gendered, and social class identifications.

As Marcus and Allen’s reactions showed—and as our current national political situation demonstrates—these differences are real. So far as I know, we did not succeed during our time together in convincing Marcus and Allen to become gay rights activists. Nor did Vanessa reflect on the limitations of her statement, “I’m Christian, so I don’t know about being gay or whatever.” If civil discourse means that members of a community must come to share a set of beliefs and values, then the future of civil discourse and democratic patriotism is dim. As I will show below, civil discourse in our community required much more subtle compromises.

### **Yes, Even Him**

*Yes, Even Him* told the story of a boy named Matthew. He is eight years old at the beginning of the play. He discovers that he has feelings for a male friend. Matthew tells his father and gets reprimanded and told that it is not okay to be gay. The play follows Matthew as he becomes a teenager and struggles with his continuing attraction to boys. He tries to repress his feelings and grows angrier and more isolated. During this time, Matthew’s toys provide commentary. Characters from the film *Toy Story* were reappropriated to represent Matthew’s childhood toys. Characters from the video game *Mortal Kombat* represented



Matthew's adolescent toys. The toys struggle to make sense of the word "gay" after a teenage Matthew loses a *Mortal Kombat* match, throws his controller to the ground, and calls the game "gay." The *Mortal Kombat* characters come out of the television and have a conversation about what the word "gay" means. I share their dialogue below because this excerpt was a clever way for students to make a space in their work for everybody in our class.

**MKC 6:** What does gay mean boss?

**Kano:** Obviously it means bad. Duh. Did you hear him stomp off? It's like, this weather outside is so gay. Or, your nose is so gay.

**Sonya:** Yeah, well you're gay.

**Kano:** Your shoes are gay.

**MKC 5:** Your hair is gay.

**MKC 4:** You fight Gay-ly.

**MKC 3:** This is a gay bed.

**MKC 2:** Yeah, well, the floor is gay.

**MKC 1:** That's a gay closet (points to closet).

In this scene, Marcus and Allen performed lines ("Your hair is gay," "You fight Gay-ly") that expressed their aversion to the word. This allowed Marcus and Allen to gain some distance from the message of the play—which in turn allowed them to perform in front of friends who, like them, found gay sexuality objectionable—and at the same time to anticipate and include the kinds of homophobic language that contribute to Matthew's struggle with his sexuality. Marcus and Allen contributed to a play which, ultimately, becomes a celebration of Matthew's sexual identity.

Soon after the previous scene, the *Toy Story* toys and the *Mortal Kombat* characters join together to try to figure out what the word "gay" means. The characters look the word up on a computer and learn its meaning, prompting the following lines:

**Beanie Baby:** It almost seems to me that the only reason the word gay was used in this play was to express how foolish people look when they use it in ways that have nothing to do with its definition. But the writers would never put such a blatant political statement into the script, would they?

I argue that this is an instance in which the playwrights anticipated and humorously worked to defuse anxiety about sexuality and cynical criticism of the goals of the play. In fact, I contend that these lines break the fourth wall, directly yet gently inviting the audience to join in the shared community of people who care about and respect one another even across their differences.

This invitation to the audience to join in the civil community continued throughout the script. Eventually, the *Mortal Kombat* characters and the *Toy Story* toys realize that Matthew is in an abusive household.

They decide they can only reach Matthew through his video games. They climb into the game and tell Matthew that it is okay for him to be gay. Matthew hears their message and moves in with his aunt, who is more accepting of his sexuality. The play ends with the following clever conversation that preempts criticism about the choice students made to create and perform a play about sexual identity:

**Beanie Baby:** Jeez Arnie, this is a really political show. I don't know how to deal with all the feelings I'm feeling right now.

**Arnie:** That's perfectly normal, Beanie. Remember, thinking through your feelings makes you stronger, not weaker.

**Beanie:** I get it. I know though, that a lot of people out there are saying to their neighbors "But I'm not gay, why does this play matter to me?" What should I tell them?

**Arnie:** Tell them that there's more to this play than just being gay. It could easily be about racial inequality, gender inequality or simply growing up. I know everyone (*Sweeping hand gesture*) out there has felt at some time or another that the world is out to get them.

Yes, *Even Him* was a powerful way for the students in Drama Workshop to invite the larger school community to engage in civil discourse about a controversial topic that had become meaningful to them. Indeed, the play was performed seven times for school audiences. Following each performance, Vanessa, Aaron, Robby, and Mark facilitated a discussion between the audiences and the students in Drama Workshop.

"This was a really good play," an audience member said during one discussion. "Were all of you supportive of making a play about being gay?"

"No!" Marcus said loudly. Many of my students on the stage laughed.

"We weren't," Mark said. "But, like Mr. Tanner says, making drama is all about working together as a group. So we just had to remember that this project wasn't all about ourselves."

"Yes," Marcus said. "Mark is right. We worked really well together. And it was really fun to be a *Mortal Kombat* character."

Recall again Westheimer's (2006) claim that caring about values of American democracy is a hallmark of democratic patriotism. The story of how my students produced *Yes, Even Him* is a story of students practicing democratic values. In essence, I am claiming that even without having explicit discussions about patriotism, there was a doing of democratic patriotism at work in my classroom. We named it as "This isn't about me; it's about us." When we met on the final day of the semester to discuss our experiences together, my students articulated the complexity of enacting these values.

"I'm so proud of this play," Aaron told the class during our final reflective discussion. "This is one of the coolest things I've ever been part of."

“You told us to become blank,” Robby said. “And some of us did it better than others, but all of us tried. That was how we ended up being able to build this together.”

Jack, a sophomore, spoke up. “Mr. Tanner, you gave us unobstructed space to explore the subject matter in this class.”

“And you also gave us the chance to try and be somebody else,” Connor said.

Vanessa talked next. “I wouldn’t have chosen to make a play about homosexuality, but I told myself to remember this isn’t about me. I got to get over my ego.”

“What we did here is really important,” Mark told the group. “This is one of the few times I’ve really felt accepted in this school. I know not everybody in this class believes that it’s okay to be gay, but I think we tried to build together anyway. That’s awesome.”

Marcus and Allen were quiet as the group talked. I was curious what they were thinking but wasn’t going to force either of them to speak. Marcus finally spoke up toward the end of the class.

“I had a lot of fun making this play,” he said. Allen nodded.

The bell rang, and our class was over. Students seemed genuinely proud of themselves as they left Drama Workshop and returned to the hallways of PAHS.

### **Democratic, Patriotic Education**

Democratic patriotism necessarily entails complexity. Students in my Drama Workshop class allowed themselves to engage in an exploration of difference they would have not chosen for themselves. Some did better than others at becoming blank, and, of course, they always returned to who they were—their unique states of “un-blankness”—after each class session and the semester as a whole. I contend that this becoming blank helped students understand who they are in their un-blankness better. It was a process that pushed egos aside in favor of working for the collective, and this contributed to students embracing difference and diversity in their everyday lives. Ultimately, a community that allowed difference to productively emerge around a controversial topic was created collectively. Voices not usually heard in traditional discussions in school were included as the group constructively negotiated and included different viewpoints in our conversations and, ultimately, the art we created. Did all students reach the same conclusion? Of course not. But they produced a democratic experience through their doing together. Indeed, Dewey (1916/2011) wrote that “democratic society repudiates the principal of external authority” and must find substitutes in “voluntary disposition and interest” which “can be created only by education” (p. 87).

Yet students do not often walk into a classroom ready to engage their differences productively. The first and second phases of the class, in which I was directive in both expectations and practices designed to encourage students to be dependent upon one another for success and support, were critical to

what followed. This was an exercise of the teacher's authority, but it was not authoritarian; I undertook it with the goal of having my students develop the capacity to discover within themselves dispositions and interests that would result in a piece of work that felt to them like a genuine expression of the group. My students entered into civil discourse around a controversial subject and, in doing so, experienced practicing the democratic values of talk, compromise, collaboration, and respect across difference, which I argue are patriotic ways of being.

Kissling (2015) suggested that students need to confront controversial problems in their schooling, particularly related to patriotism. The problems addressed in my drama class were (a) the marginalization of LGBTQ people in a heteronormative culture and (b) accepting difference and participating with it in a polarized society.

Participating in one Drama Workshop class that chose to explore issues of sexual identity is not enough for students to achieve a democratic, patriotic disposition. It is not, on its own, enough to prepare them for the serious work of participating in democracy. And yet they shared a powerful experience that may have, in fact, helped them be and become in more democratic ways.

I saw Marcus in the hallway after the semester ended.

"Hey, Mr. Tanner."

"How's it going, Marcus?"

"I miss our drama class," Marcus told me.

Marcus's comment made me smile.

"I miss it too," I admitted to Marcus.

Marcus grinned playfully at me. He gestured to the hallway around him.

"You know what, Mr. Tanner," he told me sarcastically. "It is about me now."

I laughed with Marcus.

With this joke, Marcus showed me that he recognized the difference between a space that was deliberately about us—the drama class, in which he had been able to step back from his existing identifications and consider other perspectives, experiences, and desires—and the rest of his high school spaces. He signaled that asking him to participate in, and indeed defer to, the collective will was out of the norm in his high school experience, and let me know that he missed it. It is my hope that readers are provoked to wonder how lessons from this teaching project might inform diverse pedagogical interventions, across grade levels and age groups, that equip students with the tools to participate in their communities with respect and, dare I say it, with affection for one another.

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