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An Invitation to Imagine Education Otherwise

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An Invitation to Imagine Education Otherwise

Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to the amazing group of educators that made this possible. A special Thank you to Dr. Souto-Manning for believing in me, leading the way, and inspiring change.

An Invitation to Imagine Education Otherwise

Grasilel Esperanza Díaz

Dear Fellow Teacher,

Hi! My name is Grasilel Esperanza Díaz. I am a special education teacher at PS 75, a public school in New York City. I am also the mother of three public school educated children. I myself am a former student of the New York City public school system. This is all to say that I have experienced the New York City public school system from a number of vantage points.

At the age of 7, I immigrated to the South Bronx from a small town on the south side of the Dominican Republic. I know firsthand how racism and colorism cause trauma in young children and their families. Because of my own experience in New York City schools, by the time I was 8 years old, I knew I wanted to become a bilingual teacher. Even at that age, I recognized that teachers played a pivotal role in my relationship with education.

Even as a young child, I knew that I did not want my future students to feel inferior or think of their families as disposable. I did not want them to internalize racism and colorism to fit in, to belong. I entered teaching because I wanted to communicate to them, through my everyday actions, that they belonged, that they were enough.

Despite my commitments, throughout the years, I became complicit in some of the ways that schools work to exclude children like me. COVID-19 allowed me the opportunity to question my complicity and to recommit to enacting change.

Today, I am inspired by my students, my community, and so many educators near and far. As I recommit to change, I invite you to commit to change—or at least to envision it—and travel to 2030 with me to see what might be possible if we abandon the long-enduring structures that constrain and dehumanize our students, their families, and their communities.

Close your eyes and open your mind. Take a deep breath and imagine a school where all children are encouraged to be children, to make mistakes, to play, to learn, to grow without fear for their lives—without being racialized, marginalized, and punished. We would abandon consequences for behavioral infractions that discipline and punish young children in racialized ways (US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016).

Instead of having punitive aims characteristic of the criminal system (Zehr, 2015), when we react to behaviors we would move to analyzing behaviors as symptoms of wrongs inflicted, learning from them and seeking to identify restorative actions needed and embrace our responsibility to right wrongs, to sponsor justice. We would seek to address harms by encouraging empathy and responsibility and transforming shame into transformative action (Zehr, 2015). Instead of asking what rules have been broken, who broke them, and what they deserve, we would instead ask: “Who has been harmed? What are their needs? Whose obligations are these?” (Zehr, 2015, p. 31).

Adopting a restorative justice perspective, which understands that infractions are signs of a violation of

rights that creates obligations, we would focus on addressing the situation of victims of those students who had been harmed by a long history of racism, colorism, and entangled injustices in this country, “healing for the harms that contributed to their offending behavior, including personal and historical traumas” (Zehr, 2015, p. 25).

Acknowledging the genius in every child (Muhammad, 2020), we would center their competencies and assets—and reject notions to pathologize them, their families, and communities. And then we would attend to their belonging in the classroom and school communities. Our central focus would not be to seek to punish violations of rules or to foster guilt and impose punishment; instead, we would seek to repair harm. Imagine working together with families and committing not to racialize behaviors and how we label them in ways that pathologize Black and Brown children.

For this to happen, we teachers need to shift our perspective, our gaze, our actions, and our commitments. We need to look within ourselves, analyze our lessons, problematize the curriculum, taking stock of our classroom and school environment, and then ask ourselves: Did I plan for enough time for children to truly share ideas, thoughts, and questions? Whose needs and questions are guiding the time I allocate to activities? Did I appeal to my students’ identities, practices, interests, experiences? Did I communicate to each of them that they matter?

Imagine looking into each child’s eyes, engaging with them, listening to them, and learning from them each and every day. Imagine taking the time needed to truly and fully get to know all of our students. Imagine having the dedicated time to get to know our families—our extended classroom community—including elders, experts. Imagine committing to building trust, relationships, and community with them. Imagine recognizing that this would be the work at the very foundation of our classrooms and schools, of our teaching and learning.

COVID-19 taught me that we need to start the year off with the most important part of teaching: our students. They need to be centered in our plans, in our practices, in our curriculum. It taught me that tantrums and misbehaviors are children’s ways of communicating; they are part of children’s development and of their methods of communication. As such, they should be seen as something expected of young children’s learning and not as anomalies. This means that as teachers and school staff, we would work together with families to help young children develop multiple modes of communication, multiple ways to convey their emotions and their feelings.

I invite you to imagine a school where we recognize that society has caused harm to our students, and instead of trying to exempt ourselves, we can reckon with our complicity and responsibility, committing to transformative action. Imagine joining with families and communities, putting our heads together to work on repairing that harm, reenvisioning schools as sites for healing. This work would be on the front lines of our agendas—not viewed as something we might get to later on in the year if we have time. This work would have to be collaboratively planned with our families—the real experts on the children we get to teach. It would have to be centered around healing and building trust.

This work would take courage. It would include all of our students and also include all school staff—administrators and everyone else who interacts with our students and their families. We as a community would commit to it because we knew that it was the most important and central part of our renewed education plan.

I imagine our schools taking responsibility for the damage that has already been done and making equitable commitments as part of a reparations plan to compensate for the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) schools owe Black and Brown students, their families, and communities; a sort of reparation.

Schools and community centers would be spaces where racial injustices were centrally explored, interrogated, and abolished. This would mean abolishing police and metal detectors, replacing them with counselors and social workers. This would entail saying goodbye to the all-too-common practice of suspending students. As I reflect on the inequities uncovered by COVID-19, I know that we need to leave all of that behind.

Imagine looking at behaviors inquisitively, as an expression of a child's feelings and not as a reason to exclude. This means working to validate those feelings instead of seeking to push those feelings out; to recognize that human beings have feelings. Imagine establishing ethical and professional norms (Campano et al., 2015) rooted in commitments to belonging, to inclusion, to equity, and to justice. This means that children's rights to education should be honored; children should not be excluded from activities or classrooms due to behavior concerns or any other school-related issues like missing classwork, missing homework, not participating, or not attending class. These norms would grow from a common commitment to abolish all forms of punishment.

Imagine approaching education with a positive attitude, with an "at-promise" mindset: education focused on cultivating and sustaining the worth and the brilliance of our students (Delpit, 2012). The kind of education or school where any deficit mindset that communicates that Black and Brown children are lesser than, inferior, insufficient, or broken would be dismantled, abolished. Instead, we must engage in educating children by focusing on what they can do, who they are—their assets, their strengths, and interests. These would be the foundation of the co-creation of curriculum and upholding high expectations combined with high levels of support (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Finally, we would come together to interrupt the overrepresentation of Black and Brown students in special education while offering needful support, honoring students' ways of making meaning and making sense. Instead of seeking to fix students, we would focus on repairing the system. We would focus on our own identity development and engage in ongoing self-reflection, commit to empowering students by developing, maintaining, and sustaining relationships. We would construct knowledge together with our students, their families, and communities. Importantly, we would employ assessments to give us information about what students can do and what changes we need to engage with in our own teaching (Vigil, 2018).

We know that students make connections to their learning when they see themselves, their practices, their experiences, their families, and their communities in our classrooms, books, and curriculum; there are lots of examples we can learn from (Souto-Manning, 2020; Souto-Manning et al., 2018). These connections are vital to building trust, and trust is the first step in building authentic relationships with our students, their families, and their communities.

Now, stop imagining. Let's reflect on 2020. Let's redesign our schools, classrooms, and the ways we interact with our students, their families, and the community writ large. We have already tried tweaking the existing norms within our schools. As I reflect on 2020 and the changes brought about by COVID-19,

I now know that it is not enough to change some areas of the curriculum. These small ripples are no longer enough. We need to engage in “tearing down old structures and ways of thinking” and in “forming new ideas, new forms of social interactions, new ways to be inclusive, new ways to discuss inequity and distribute wealth and resources” (Love, 2019, p. 88).

We had been told it was impossible for all of our students to have technology or Wi-Fi at home. Responding to COVID-19 quickly showed us it was possible. While COVID-19 brought about much trauma, it also opened up the possibility for imagining an other future. Another future is not only possible but necessary. We need “new ways to resist, new ways to agitate,” as well as “new ways to reach children trying to recover from the educational survival complex, new ways to show dark children they are loved in this world” (Love, 2019). We need to once again find the humanity central to teaching.

Like Roy (2020), I too believe that nothing could be worse than to return to normalcy marked by racial injustice, classrooms as sites of trauma, and schools as enactments of the carceral state (Annamma, 2016). As Love (2019) wrote, “Education can’t save us. We have to save education” (p. 88). And the time is now. If not us, then who? If not now, then when?

Will you join me as we reimagine education and build a future that does not yet exist? I hope so. Our futures, our children, and their futures depend on it. And, as poet June Jordan reminds us, “We are the ones we have been waiting for.”

Thank you!

(An earlier version of this letter was presented at the Reimagining Education Summer Institute at Teachers College, Columbia University, in July 2020.)

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Grasiel Esperanza Díaz graduated from Bank Street College of Education in 2012 with a master’s in dual-language childhood special and general education. She recently finished her second master’s from Fordham University (early childhood special and general education dual certification). She is a current first-grade dual-language (Spanish and English) elementary school teacher in New York City. She has over 13 years of teaching experience in New York City public elementary schools where she has taught in monolingual and dual-language inclusive classrooms.