

Becoming a Critical Social Educator: The Power of a Collective to Counteract Copy Room Conversations

Ryan Oto^a, Ngan Nguyen^b, Megan Custer^b, Peder Ericson^b, Nick Liebelt^b

^aUniversity of Minnesota

^bRacial Justice Community School

Abstract

This paper recounts stories of a sixth-grade teaching team's efforts to help each other in the becoming of critical social educators. Struggling against the conditions of oppression in schools and the toxicity of what we call "copy room conversations" requires a kind of support and solidarity we created through our small collective that was grounded in vulnerability with and commitment to one another. This piece tells our stories in the hope that others who share our values might come together in their own school communities to form collectives like ours. We hope to provide a model for building solidarity with those who also aim to become critical educators and to reject the white supremacist politics of schooling.

Keywords: Critical love, collective-building, humanizing, anti-oppressive pedagogies

<https://doi.org/10.31274/tcse.11520>

Introduction

The call for this inaugural issue of the *Critical Social Educator* is, "What does it mean to be a critical social educator?" We have no definitive answer, for we do not know what it means to arrive at this location. Grounded in the idea that justice work is never complete (Tuck & Yang, 2018), we as sixth grade teachers lovingly offer this question instead: What does it mean *to be in the process of becoming* a critical social educator? This subtle shift underscores the reality that we came into teaching with different beliefs, hopes, aspirations, and expectations that shifted and changed as we grew together. It also signals that we believe this work demands us to unsettle the commonsense approaches to

schooling that have too long sustained oppression in schools (Kumashiro, 2002), and that the work to do so is always ongoing.

We also understand that becoming a critical social educator is intimately intertwined with the broader issues that destroy Black lives. Following the protests surrounding George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis--the place we call home--our communities do not look or feel the same. Educators can no longer afford to perpetuate the logic that schools are apolitical spaces of safety because, as we have seen, it only protects white supremacy and advances anti-blackness. Thus, our own reflections on and interrogation of ourselves is in relationship to those we work alongside, so that we might build a community fueled by critical love and

humanizing one another in each and every moment. It is our duty as rising critical social educators to commit to a conceptual shift from what we need *to know*, to who we need *to become*, in order to support young people and each other.

Here in Minneapolis, and in the Twin Cities more generally, young people are leading inspiring work to enact immediate and lasting change in the community by organizing protests, clean-up efforts, and the removal of police from schools. We view this moment as evidence that we must continue the work of building spaces and feelings of belonging alongside the young people with whom we work. Likewise, we must continue this work in our classrooms, centering the voices of young people advocating for change, creating spaces for young people to critique the current systems and institutions as they reimagine what society could look like while we, as teachers, support, amplify, and celebrate the inspiring work, ideas, and movements that youth create.

In this context, we wonder what becoming a critical social educator will look like as our local communities fight for racial justice against the state and its institutions. We remain open to the process of *becoming* critical, with the hope that we can find solidarity with BIPOC youth in our shared humanity so that we do not lose sight of liberation as a community-based project.

Throughout this essay, we tell our stories of our journeys in working to become critical social educators of sixth graders, a process of unlearning the politics of schooling (Apple, 1990) (which show up in what we call “copy room conversations”), to center our humanity with one another, and to collectively build a space grounded in vulnerability with, and commitment to, one another. By sharing our stories, we hope to provide a model for building

solidarity with those who also aim to become critical educators and to reject the white supremacist politics of schooling.

The aim of this piece is to shine a light on the importance of the collective we formed here together. Struggling against the conditions of oppression in schools—against the toxicity of copy room conversations—requires a kind of support and solidarity we created through our small collective. As individuals, we may not have been able to wrestle with the daily struggles against white supremacy in our school environment without the sounding board and support we intentionally nurtured among our small group. This piece tells the story of our collective in the hope that others who share our values might come together in their own school communities to form collectives like this one.

Who We Are

Racial Justice Community School (RJCS)¹ is described as a racially diverse school, with 40% of students identifying as Black/African, 30% identifying as Latinx, 11% identifying as white, 8% identifying as Asian, and 1% identifying as Indigenous. Before going further, we want to let you get to know us in order to understand the journeys we’ve taken individually to become a collective that fosters criticality through love, vulnerability, and solidarity.

Ryan

I am well aware that my identity as a multiracial cisgender middle class male has afforded me space to pass for white and also to be seen as a person of color. My ability to boundary cross has provided me opportunities through my eleven-year teaching career to work alongside BIPOC youth in community research and activism. In these moments, I learned the most about myself and the urgency of transforming schools into spaces of liberation. I

observed and experienced firsthand the ways that white supremacy permeates decision-making within schools at all levels, and that, despite clarion calls to act by BIPOC youth, the demand from white teachers and administrators to “be patient for change” or the chorus that “teaching needs to remain politically neutral” are not-so-subtle ways of dismissing the action that needs to take place to disrupt white supremacy in schools.

Informed by these experiences and what I was learning in graduate school about anti-oppressive theories of education, I came to RJCS ready to enact material changes to curriculum, procedures, and policies that would work toward racial justice. When I was offered a position as the professional learning community (PLC) lead for the 6th grade team that the principal wanted to rebuild, I was both excited and anxious. I had never taught 6th grade and the uncertainties of what that experience would be, along with leading for my first time in an official sense, felt like too much. Simultaneously, I knew that the possibilities of building something no one else had seen was too exciting to pass up. I came to this work hoping to build a collective that worked toward anti-oppressive action in schools. Even if I didn’t know what that was going to look and feel like, it was worth the chance.

Ngan

I identify as 1.5 generation immigrant, Southeast Asian American cisgender woman. Throughout my K-12 educational experience, I’ve never seen myself reflected in the curriculum or in the educators in front of me. Therefore, my commitment has always been to provide students with the opportunities to learn about themselves and each other through the teaching of ethnic studies. My work alongside BIPOC youth organizers at a nonprofit in

Providence, Rhode Island solidified for me that in order to elevate youth power, we must provide spaces specifically in the K-12 classroom for youth to nourish their identities, develop relationships, and learn the truth about their histories. I recognize that I am an outsider, teaching in a community that I do not currently live in. My position as a teacher is inherently tied to power and privilege to make curriculum and pedagogical choices in the classroom without questions. I understand that it is a duty and a lifetime commitment to unlearn and dismantle anti-blackness from within. I find it difficult to explain what this collective means to me because sometimes, I am still in disbelief that it exists in this context. I graduated from a teacher preparation program that was very unlike others. It emphasized the role of love, humanity, and vulnerability in the journey to transformative and healing work in education. I was skeptical that I would be able to engage in a more humanizing experience outside of that program, especially in a public school district. But I quickly realized after several PLC meetings at RJCS that it wasn’t impossible after all. Every one of us spoke transparently about our struggles and relationships to justice, education, and freedom. Through those conversations, I felt my gut telling me it’s okay to be vulnerable with this group of people. I found myself looking forward to every time we met. This collective became an anchoring space for me. Whenever I struggle to find the humanity and humility in the everyday grind, I come back to our collective in order to reground myself in who I am, who we are, and our hopes and dreams for freedom.

Megan

I am a queer white woman who grew up in rural Minnesota and have spent the majority of my 31 years in predominantly white spaces. My

undergrad degree is in social work, and I shifted my focus to teaching after spending a few years facilitating after-school programs centered around violence prevention. That experience of introducing content surrounding “-isms” and other ideas that some adults viewed inappropriate, was eye-opening. Young people were ready for these conversations; students would take on these discussions and share experiences that made them much more qualified to lead than myself. The oppression faced by young people is rooted in a lack of trust by adults that is only compounded when they are young people of color. Adults assume that young people must be led and shall not be allowed to wander. We place no trust in young people’s reasoning, no trust in their abilities, and no trust in their capacity for compassion. Even with my experiences in knowing that young people can take hold of a space and lead it with grace, I still struggled with my focus on feeling in control when I started teaching. Discussions around “classroom management” echoed through my head during my entire first semester. However, in that time this team helped me remember what I had already known. This need for control is not rooted in the best interest of young people; it is in what I believed was the best interest of myself. We continuously shared the weight when exhaustion set in as we battled our own inner ideas of what “successful teaching” looks like. This process allowed me to always come back to center on what is necessary, that community is not management.

Nick

I am a white cisgender 27-year-old male, which grants me unearned authority to hold space in certain settings, especially as a teacher. Even though I come from a lower middle-class single mother household, I still had

opportunities that many of my friends of color did not have living in an upper middle-class with a two-parent household. When I was going through school, I had always thought this inequality was explained by our interests or willingness to do an activity. This narrative was ingrained in my head as I was attending predominantly white institutions and having most of my educational placements in predominantly white districts. In my first experiences teaching, I taught what was pushed on me throughout my years: that hard work and commitment would lead to results. However, I had a nagging feeling in my heart that made me feel this wasn’t right for me or for children, but I was not confident in myself making that adjustment because I didn’t know how that would look or feel.

Fast forward one year to when I started my first year at RJCS. I entered this space continuing to use techniques that have been pushed on me, such as ENVoY², although I felt it may not be the best because it seemed more like training animals than working with humans. That changed within a month. I quickly learned how loving and passionate my team was with their approach to teaching and students. I quickly found the courage to reimagine my teaching practices that best reflected what I had begun to unlearn from my years of schooling. I am still in the process of unlearning the traditional arrangements of schooling and student-teacher relationships. In working towards creating a space where the sense of belonging can be nurtured, while also understanding and contesting the unearned power and privilege that comes with being white and male. However, in the end, I know that whatever space I’m able to hold because of my identity, the important part for my teaching is to create and allow space for the children to enter and authentically be themselves

regardless, of what I was taught going through my teacher preparation program.

Peder

I am a white, 23-year-old, cisgender male. I come from a middle-class family full of teachers—my grandparents were teachers, my mom is a teacher, and my brother teaches just down the hall from me. My educational experiences have been traditional, graduating from a small predominantly white institution in 2019 before joining RJCS. It is essential that I interrogate my own personal identity and privilege, as my experiences as a white, cisgender, male differ so greatly from the predominant experiences of my students and colleagues. Through this interrogation, I must consciously identify and dismantle the ways anti-blackness and patriarchy were inscribed into my identity, so that I can develop the anti-racist philosophy and pedagogy necessary to effectively support our students. At RJCS, I have joined a community with similar values.

I interviewed to join RJCS just three days after finishing my semester student teaching at Robert Healy Elementary, a K-8 neighborhood school in the Bridgeport neighborhood of Chicago. As I drove back to Minneapolis from Chicago with my older brother who teaches 7th grade at RJCS, we spoke about the upcoming interview and what I should expect from the 6th grade team. Over the course of the drive, I heard stories about the 6th grade's positivity, energy, and vision for what schools can and should look like, as well as their emphasis on the notion of "community." I walked into the interview that following Monday a little intimidated, a little overwhelmed, but inspired about the possibility of joining this team. I began teaching there later that week. Amidst that transition, I was welcomed with nothing but warmth. In a position that could have been

isolating, I joined a network of support and trust that grounded me for the work to come.

A Serendipitous (And Intentional) Experiment

Our coming together was a combination of luck and intentionality that started with the hiring process. The principal understood that he needed to hire educators who viewed the institution of school in critical ways, which led to a concerted recruiting effort that began in late fall and culminated in mid-summer of 2019. In each interview, it became clear that the 6th grade team was unique: on paper, they had a sum total of zero years of official licensed teaching experience, no previous experience teaching 6th grade, and two of the four members had yet to complete their licensure programs. However, the principal noted, "these are the right people." As we reflected before the year began about the team, he asked me (Ryan), "you have them. What are you going to do now?" I wasn't sure how to respond, but I trusted his instincts. There was something in each of these people that was special.

Most of our time together began in our weekly PLC meeting space. These formal times have been traditionally driven by the bureaucracy of school, where teachers typically come together to enter student assessment data into a pre-formatted worksheet by district officials so that teachers' labor gets simplified to searching for numbers and entering them into their respective blank spaces. Consequently, this time became a burden of completing paperwork rather than meaningfully being together. I knew that I wanted this to be different and considered it an opportunity to foster a space grounded in our own sense of connectedness. I didn't know how this would look or feel going into it, but as Kumashiro (2002) reminds me, thinking about what is

unknown can be far more generative than what is knowable.

I grounded the group in the summer leading into school, asking them to read *Troublemakers: Lessons in freedom from young children at school* (Shalaby, 2017). I hoped this text would push us to frame our collective work as a practice of building the critical capacity to think about ourselves and schooling, and to avoid brazenly taking up the authority and power that came with being a “teacher.” We started by imagining what school could and should look like based on our critical perspectives on schooling. As everyone shared their responses, inevitably we came to an impasse: Was any of this really possible? Knowing that the group was unique because there was no institutional memory to combat, I asked why it was so difficult to imagine our dreams becoming a reality. Referencing *Troublemakers*, I offered that perhaps young people know what is best for themselves and that it is our obligation to listen to them as we work toward imagining a more just future.

As we continued to meet, Ngan suggested that we begin each meeting with questions that centered our individual and collective humanity. Each day we entered into conversations, sat with one another, and listened as we took time to reflect on questions like, *what brings you joy? Or, what makes you feel human?* These small moments set a tone of compassion and presence that I had not felt before. It wasn’t a space to pass through as a part of the labor of the day, it quickly became a critical moment to slow down and be with one another. These moments allowed us to clear our thinking and focus on what mattered to our work: how we showed up and what we stood for. As our intimacy with one another grew through these conversations, the business of school was replaced with a labor of community and love. It

became a space where we suddenly could continually re-ground and ensure that we were living the anti-oppressive beliefs we espoused.

Copy Room Conversations

The space that we built together was intended to be a site of building a critical collective, one that would offer us space to re-imagine what teaching could look like or become when centered in humanizing ourselves and young people. Reflecting back on the purpose of this space together, we realized that it also served as necessary to combat the traditional politics of schooling that we confronted every day.

The first weeks of school felt the most challenging as our ideals clashed with what we experienced and the advice we received from older colleagues. When young people pushed us with their behaviors, more experienced colleagues would tell us students were testing us to see what we would let them get away with. They encouraged us to be stricter, that these young people did not deserve grace or freedom because they had not earned it yet as evidenced by their actions, and that if we did not set non-negotiable boundaries with students, that we would be seen as meek. Over the course of the next few months, we were routinely inundated with this narrative in the informal spaces of the day, particularly in the copy room. Trapped by our need to make copies, veteran teachers would confront us, accusing us of lowering our standards for students, not being rigorous enough in our teaching, and failing to prepare students for future grades because of our approaches to teaching. Battered and bruised by the onslaught of these unsolicited narratives, we began to wonder if holding onto our beliefs about justice in schools was leading us down a path of tacitly lowering expectations for our students by not

punishing them for fighting, for not completing assignments on time, or for not listening to us the first time when we gave instructions.

These politics came to a head as we planned a community celebration for the day before winter break. From our conversations with each other and with young people, we wanted to create a moment *with* youth to celebrate their commitment to being a part of the 6th grade community at RJCS. We planned a day of events, using surveys from students to get ideas about what they would want to do. Their request: have different activities in each room and let us decide what to do and where to go throughout the day. We loved the idea, but worried about how our colleagues would take it. The two weeks leading up to the celebration were spent intensely organizing the activities and also strategizing how we would approach colleagues about the idea, anxious about the conflicts we feared would ensue. Being together as a collective, though, offered us the solidarity and confidence required to take up these struggles, knowing that this was right because it's what young people had asked for.

When we posed the idea to colleagues, their reactions were mixed. Teachers and staff of color excitedly supported the idea and asked how they could help, offering to join our organizing efforts and celebrate young people with us. On the other hand, white teachers were largely reticent and outwardly hostile toward the idea and toward us, despite the support we had from the administration. They viewed our efforts as “bad teaching,” that we were not holding students accountable for problematic behaviors and that they would continue to misbehave because there were no consequences for their actions. In one such interaction, a teacher had gone so far as to confront one of us in the midst of a conversation with the principal to implore that

we were doing something so wrong that it was bound to fail and that students would be physically aggressive toward each other. They noted “in all of my years teaching, I’ve never seen something that will blow up so terribly done in this school. It will fail and you will be to blame.” Despite the fallacious nature of this narrative, the damage had been done. We were replete with fear that we weren’t doing our jobs well.

Lost in the Forest: Finding Our Way Toward Criticality

With copy room conversations looming over us, our labor of centering humanity and becoming critical educators often felt like a journey through an unknown forest without a map. We were a vanguard of new ideas, constantly being called back to the traditional orthodoxy of teaching, but we knew that turning back would only harm ourselves and young people. It was in these moments that the space we had with each other served to guide us even though we didn’t know the direction we were going or the destination we might find. The following are moments for us that we found ourselves lost, and how the space re-grounded us so we could continue toward becoming critical educators

Ryan

With the tension of our decision to celebrate the 6th grade community palpable, I walked into school filled with anxiety. The ramifications of anything not going well would ripple throughout the school and haunt our work for days. As I walked through the 6th grade hall, I was greeted by smiles and laughter. Nick, Megan, Ngan, and Peder were adorned in their own onesie-pajamas, the uniform for the day as we gathered for a moment to go over what we each needed. Their energy and

positivity re-grounded me and brought me back to the critical space I needed to be in.

Everything was ready and I could feel my nerves jump out as the first bell rang. Students moved in and out freely, having dance parties in the hallways, making tik-toks, reading books in the library, playing endless games of 2-hand touch football in the gym. In that time, no issues arose that were any different than a typical day—except that there were *fewer* of them. The biggest issue was with other educators in the space. The loud laughter in the halls, or the dancing and singing coming from the 6th grade end of the hallway was met with instructions to “quiet down” and when one of us would ask a fellow teacher if everything was okay, we were met with eye-rolls and questioning of “It’s just a little loud, don’t you think?” This comment struck me intensely as it was directed at the laughter of children—sincere laughter.

So, if we are willing to quiet and tamper their enjoyment, what does this mean we are increasing the volume on? It was clear that our commitment to community, joy, and freedom had unsettled something, but for the rest of the day happiness rang out through the halls from the 6th grade.

Ngan

I came to RJCS carrying various experiences of existing in institutional spaces as a young woman of color. I was used to working against oppression within the system instead of outside it. So, while I had many aspirations of being a critical social educator, I found myself complying with the very practices I had deemed oppressive. The collective encouraged me to reflect and share honestly how I was dealing with these contractions in my own classroom and relationships with 6th grade students. For

me, this collective is where I reground myself in humanity and collectivity.

After a challenging first hour in the middle of January, we were called to meet about an important matter in our room by the Dean of Students, Ms. Russell, and Ryan. Ms. Russell informed us that a major incident occurred outside of school yesterday that involved a group of 6th grade students beating up one of their classmates at their house. My heart sank, at the thought of how such violence could occur in 6th grade. We’ve discussed so much as a collective this year about how to create a space where students feel they belong, yet this incident happened. I found myself lamenting how maybe the incident could have been prevented if we had done something more or something different for each 6th grader involved. I asked myself, “Are we the problem? Did we enable this incident? Were our co-workers right all along?”

Before we got too ahead of ourselves, blaming our ways of doing things, feeling hopeless—or worse, getting caught up in the consequences for students—Ryan reminded us that we have to think of the larger picture: *why* did that incident happen, not *how* it did. If we’re going to continue this project of belonging, how can we think of ways to repair harm as a community moving forward? I found myself disagreeing with Ryan’s call to recenter humanity and young people for the first time. I felt that we weren’t allowed time to process or time to take in what happened. We ended up brainstorming action steps for ourselves, but never really believing it could work.

After Ryan left, Megan, Nick, Peder and I found ourselves digging deeply into why we felt frustrated or hopeless in that moment. It was not always easy for us to have conversations where we contested ourselves on what we know and what we truly believe is just. As the

four of us continued to talk and reflect on Ryan's words, we began to take to heart the urgency of restoring not only for the community, but for ourselves what it means to continue our project of belonging despite setbacks. For me, I just needed a moment to just be with the collective, in order to reground myself and reground each other in our beliefs.

Despite being frustrated or irritable, we still came together afterwards. The collective allowed me to recognize that our humanity means not only supporting one another, but also moments of emotionally charged conversations, disagreements, and contradictions.

Megan

On days when the weight of traditional schooling sat heavily on our shoulders, we would check in. The check-ins went beyond "how are you?" It was understanding body language. It was knowing when one of us was dysregulated and was going to need support throughout the day, that there were times to push one another's thinking and other moments where an unconditional hug was the better choice. The check-ins were filled with tears when students would challenge us to prove if the love was unconditional. We would always hold steadfast for our students knowing that when we were together, we could share our frustrations and how it felt so personal, so that we could reground ourselves in what we knew was right: our commitment to humanizing one another and young people. Together, sharing everything we knew, we figured out what our approach would be and how we would best support with the resources available within ourselves and with our co-conspirators in the building. These moments became an important daily routine; I always knew that if I

needed something, the others in the collective would support me critically and lovingly.

As cliché as it is, it remains true that you don't fully understand what you have until it's gone. This was the case when Nick went on paternity leave. We knew we would each be shouldering more emotional responsibilities within our community in his absence. The young people we worked with knew "Mr. Liebelt" and did not care much for anyone else sitting in for him, as was evident by the number of times young people would come into my room saying, "Mr. Liebelt went to a doctor's appointment, can I work in your room?" So, despite the long-term substitute's best efforts to "manage" the classroom, we understood that during all periods of the day, our classes would increase by 10-15 students. Though exhausted in these days, I could sustain my work knowing that we were all working to care for each other, adult and youth alike. It was proof that these connections and our mutual love for one another community. During the hardest of days, whatever that reason might have been, this sense of connectedness kept me going. And still now, it is what makes me want to continue growing and learning with this team and with the young people we work alongside.

Peder

Joining a school halfway through a year, as a first-year teacher, is a difficult task to undertake. Rather than having a fresh opportunity to facilitate an original classroom culture, establish personal classroom norms, and get to know students while they get to know each other in the context of your classroom environment, you must be patient as you adapt, are flexible, and encourage students to adapt to the transition as well. Entering this process, I expected to experience somewhat of

a disconnect from the grade level, as I did not share their collective introduction and experiences. I was worried that this labor would fall on me alone and that I would be playing a perpetual game of catch up to get to where the rest of the team was. My anxieties mixed with my enthusiasm, and it was hard to make sense of what I was feeling.

Through the communal practice of planning, organizing, and envisioning from the 6th grade team, these fears were dispelled. I immediately felt the community that had been emphasized to me on that car drive back to Minneapolis. From my first day, as I was invited to join the others on a team building retreat at Ryan's house, I felt an immediate sense of belonging. Here, everyone took turns sharing the experiences that led them to RJCS and their hopes for the future we would help create together. The group's humanizing, affirming, and vulnerable work was made clear as we discussed a plan to reimagine traditional grading practices and teaching habits. It was disorienting, but in the best of ways, as I was quickly challenged to jump deeply into these conversations. In these formative moments, the 6th grade team extended its sense of community to me, and I felt grateful. I could see suddenly how our students would feel community amongst themselves, as well, and I was excited to be a part of this work.

Nick

At the start of second semester, we all had this feeling that the traditional approach to grading student learning was not centering humanity. Despite our efforts, students often reacted to receiving grades more like a punishment and less of an opportunity for growth. We decided that a letter grade was not representing our kids accurately and was causing unnecessary harm, so we wanted to

change our grading approach. Based on a survey we gave students about their feelings on grading, we learned that many students viewed grades as a measure of their success *as people*, rather than their growth in classroom learning or their roles in the 6th grade community. Given this information, we decided to give all the students an A in each of our classes as a way to show that we saw them as successful. We offered narrative comments specific to their classroom learning that culminated in letters we wrote to the students and their families about their individual strengths and challenges in the community more broadly. However, changing the grading process was not well received by other teachers, and the "copy room conversations" became a constant presence in our time at school. I grew worried that what we were doing wasn't right. We were mostly first-year teachers that changed the traditional idea of grading with veteran teachers telling us how wrong we were for our actions. I didn't know how to talk about it, and I felt stuck.

At the same time, whenever we had the opportunity to meet in our PLC and discuss what we were seeing with this change, our doubts disappeared. One day stands out to me. We met in my room, and Ryan came in to talk about what we were learning about students through this new grading process. He had us write different things we heard students sharing about being in 6th grade, specific to their learning. As we wrestled with what we had observed, my comment reflected my doubts, as I wrote down that students thought our classes were easy because they were getting A's. I was frustrated with myself and unsure of where we were going until we paused and reflected together on what we were hearing: students felt good about school. They saw themselves as successful, and they wanted to be in our classrooms and learn more. It was exciting for a



moment, and then shame overcame me. I wanted to say that I felt that way all along, but I knew it wasn't the truth. I had doubted our efforts. Ryan reminded me of something important - that there is no playbook for what we were trying to do. But if we listened, truly listened, to what young people were asking for, it would become apparent *what* needed to be done and *how* it needed to be done. Without that moment, I don't know if I could have kept grading the way I was under the pressure put on me by other teachers. I am grateful for it, though, as it reminded me that although becoming a critical teacher is not an easy path, it is more possible when surrounded by critical friends.

Closing Thoughts

We share these stories in the spirit of hope that readers might begin to imagine their own collective spaces that offer refuge from the oppressive forces of common-sense teaching. We hope they remind them that teaching *can be* an act of humanity, and that through collectivity, we grow stronger as individuals. This work of building an intentional collective of teachers striving to become critical educators was purposeful, strategic, and forced us to confront the oppressive political dynamics of adults in ways that no teaching program had prepared us for. It was through our commitment to one another that we were able to persevere amidst the onslaught of pushback we faced from our colleagues, that brought us

confidence when we needed it, and reminded us that justice and humanity are inextricably linked. It was these spaces that frustrated us, brought us joy, and challenged us to imagine a more just vision of education that we could enact together. At the same time, we must admit, we also shared these stories for ourselves. It was cathartic to look back at how our journeys have meandered through the forest toward becoming critical educators. While we remain steadfast in our belief that our stories offer meaningful truths to others, it is also providing us a critical re-grounding in the work we must continue to re-commit ourselves to, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. So much of what we came to know about ourselves, young people, and the communities we are a part of last year were rooted in the human experiences we shared. The virtual teaching world is not the same, nor will it ever. It is filled with personal distractions, technocratic bookkeeping, and uncertainties that make it easy to forget the humanity that brought us together in our efforts to transform schooling, teaching, and education. Consequently, this observation serves as a reminder that this work is not linear. We must reground in one another's humanity constantly so we can show up for young people in the meaningful ways we did our first year together. Perhaps then we can begin the work of reimagining a more just future for education and work to become the critical educators we want to be.

Notes

1. RJCS is a pseudonym. Other adults and youth named throughout this article have been given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.
2. ENVoY is a non-verbal classroom management approach that seeks to train youth to respond to visual and spatial cues to alter their behavior patterns. For more information: <https://michaelgrinder.com/envoy/>

Authors

Ryan Oto, University of Minnesota, otoxx003@umn.edu

Ngan Nguyen, Racial Justice Community School

Megan Custer, Racial Justice Community School

Peder Ericson, Racial Justice Community School

Nick Liebelt, Racial Justice Community School

References

Apple, M. (1990). *Ideology and curriculum*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Kumashiro, K. (2002). *Troubling education: Queer activism and antioppressive pedagogy*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Shalaby, C. (2017). *Troublemakers: Lessons in freedom from young children at school*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Tuck, E. & Yang, K. W. (2018). Introduction: Born under the rising sign of social justice. In E. Tuck & K. W. Yang (Eds.), *Toward What Justice?: Describing Diverse Dreams of Justice in Education* (pp. 1-18). New York, NY: Routledge.