Original Research Report

Precedence of Praxis: Humanizing Pedagogy in a Standards-Dominated System

Journal of Education
2025, Vol. 205(3) 226–238

DOI: 10.1177/00220574251320092
journals.sagepub.com/home/jex
Sage

Emily Thurston[1], JoeAnn Nguyen[1], Tequila Butler[1], and Pete Compitello[1]

Abstract

This qualitative case study examines the implementation of humanizing pedagogies in 18 English language arts classrooms. Using semi-structured interviews and observations, we investigated how ELA teachers navigated policy mandates and a compliance culture while enacting reflexive, responsive, and student-centered instruction. As a problem of practice, our findings highlight neoliberal and new managerial barriers to humanizing pedagogy, underscoring the significance of a whole-child approach at all levels of the education system, particularly in contexts where standardized assessments dominate concepts of educational equity and excellence.

Keywords

Equity, Teaching, Inclusion, Leadership, Policy

Introduction

The evolution of the organizational structure and culture of American public education reflects a societal debate about the purpose and nature of schooling. The relationships between classroom pedagogy and modern education policy, moreover, underscore the divergent views of this debate. Humanizing pedagogy has recently gained traction in education discourse as an approach that recognizes the classroom as the site of both struggle and joy, emphasizing student-centered and culturally responsive teaching rooted in robust relational ethics (Nelson Mandela University [NMU], 2020). There remain ongoing challenges to the widespread implementation of this approach, as schools must navigate the pressures of high-stakes standardized testing, accountability measures, and standardized curriculum frameworks. These structures prioritize measurable outcomes in ways that may interfere with a vision of holistic education, preventing educators from fully embracing humanizing practices in the classroom.

This qualitative case study is part of a broader movement for humanizing education and prioritizing the whole child in the complex and contested landscape of the American public education system. Drawing upon extant data from our partnership in a Networked Improvement Community (NIC), this paper examines the factors facilitating and impeding humanizing pedagogy in urban, secondary ELA classrooms. Four interrelated questions seek to understand the perceptions and experiences of a group of teachers who were asked to share their use of student-centered literacy practices with the NIC. Specifically, how did this group of teachers:

(1) perceive agency and autonomy over classroom instruction,
(2) discuss beliefs related to humanizing pedagogy,
(3) enact humanizing pedagogy in their classrooms, and
(4) perceive the influences of their humanizing pedagogy on student learning?

Conceptual Framework

Humanizing Education

Humanizing pedagogy is a concept akin to *classroom as community* (Hooks, 1994), fusing a whole-child, student-centered ethos with Freirean *conscientization*. In her influential works on education, Black feminist bell Hooks (1994) critically centered the student, calling upon educators to value the presence of every student, recognize their uniqueness, seek to understand how the student and their contributions influence classroom dynamics, and build collective capacity toward *education as the practice of freedom* (p. 8). Hsieh (2022) echoed the intellectual legacy of hooks, asserting:

[1]University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Emily Thurston, School of Education, University of Pittsburgh, 5500 Wesley W. Posvar Hall, 230 S Bouquet St, Pittsburgh, PA 15260.
Email: emt88@pitt.edu

> Humanizing pedagogies are based on a foundation of authentic, humanizing relationships, established from the start of time together as a learning community, and consistently reinforced during time spent in community. Humanizing classrooms acknowledge the whole of people (teachers and students) in classrooms, making connections between who people are, their knowledge and their experiences, and their learning… mindful of what they need to be fully present and ready to learn... (p. 42)

Conversant with hooks, Freire (1993) extended the relational ethics of excellent teaching and learning. Emphasizing critical discernment, Freire contended a rigorous learning environment depended on the teacher's understanding of humans as agentic actors in a complex *social ecology* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)—requiring teachers to perceive how students' identities and lived experiences affect what students can and cannot *yet* do in the classroom (NMU, 2020).

The "recognition of the fullness of one's own humanity as well as the humanity of others," (pp. 280–281) Legette and colleagues (2022) asserted, is a prerequisite for trustworthiness and for addressing the dehumanization of Black youth in schools—conditions that Johnson et al. (2019) amplified as "physical, symbolic, linguistic, curricular, pedagogical, and systemic school violence" (pp. 52–53). These critical scholars indicate cultural affirmations are a boon to classroom learning but are insufficient to address structural racism. A more effective response to the multidimensionality of oppression against marginalized communities, they concluded, is to historicize institutional oppression, challenge the normalization of whiteness, and center subjugated knowledges. The classroom should be imbued, Johnson and colleagues (2019) declared, with *revolutionary love* (p. 48), a love that empowers *education as the practice of freedom*. Humanizing pedagogy is the cultivation of a critical, loving learning environment that is meaningful to the individual and the collective, rich in both joy and struggle, and actively working against forces of dehumanization.

Neoliberal Ideology and New Managerialism in Public Education

A social ecological model presents a phenomenon, such as classroom teaching and learning, as emergent and in relation to social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental factors across individual, interpersonal, organizational, institutional, and systemic layers of society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Although we acknowledge the utility of a comprehensive scope, the limitations of our research project prevent us from fully engaging the social ecological model to contextualize humanizing pedagogical beliefs and actions. Instead, we focus on salient tensions between humanizing pedagogy and the public education system, which we refer to as *neoliberal* in ideology and *managerial* in structure (Shepherd, 2018).

Neoliberal ideology champions the principles of free market capitalism, including competition and efficiency, to advance policies such as voucher programs, charter schools, curriculum standardization, and high-stakes testing as a measure of school accountability (Ravitch, 2020). New managerialism refers to the hierarchical and bureaucratic organization of public education, which functions to monitor, assess, and enforce dominant formal and informal neoliberal policies (Lynch, 2014; Shepherd, 2018). Despite great variation across teachers' educational philosophies and goals, neoliberal ideology prioritizes social mobility as the primary goal of education, while new managerialism relies upon high-stakes standardized assessments to measure teachers' and schools' progress toward neoliberal goals (Ramlackhan, 2019).

Critical scholarship suggests a continuation, and in some cases an exacerbation, of inequitable educational opportunities and outcomes across decades of neoliberal reforms. Indeed, Ali (2019) averred that the equity rhetoric of reforms—"improved schooling opportunities, especially for children of color located in poor residential environments"—belied "a more divided, tiered school arrangement that expelled black-and-brown teachers from education while closing down the schools they worked in, primarily situated in urban America" (p. 102). Reforms have adversely influenced teacher and student experiences in multiple ways. For example, institutional pressure to increase test scores has coincided with narrowed course offerings, content of tested domains, and modes of instruction (Au, 2007; Emler et al., 2019). The focus on standardized data in teachers' professional development activities has often minimized discourse on and support for holistic education goals (Datnow et al., 2020; Guenther, 2021). Furthermore, critiques of construct validity, reliability, and cultural relevance have called into question the use of high-stakes standardized assessments in public education's accountability system (August & Slama, 2016; Baker et al., 2010; Shepard, 2015).

Other critical researchers speculate on how neoliberal ideologies and new managerial structures interfere with divergent educational philosophies or change efforts related to addressing root causes of social stratification. Some highlight the *deprofessionalization* of teachers, who are positioned as facilitators of a prescribed curriculum, as well as the dehumanization of students, who are positioned as automatons, meant to consume specified standards (de Saxe et al., 2020; Gunzenhauser, 2006; Milner, 2013). Others note that justice-driven transformation, with its manifold meanings (Tuck & Yang, 2018), may entail a degree of local agency and autonomy that is discouraged, impeded, or denigrated by neoliberal reforms and policymakers (Mehta, 2015). Keeping in mind four decades of institutional pressure toward the standardization and mechanization of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and accountability, we now dive into the tensions and possibilities of humanizing pedagogy in ELA classrooms.

Method

Study Context

The site of our data collection was a five-year, grant-funded networked improvement community, called a Network for School Improvement (NSI). Derived from the field and methodology of Improvement Science, NICs are "scientific learning communities in which… interested partners come together to address a common problem of practice through a focused, iterative approach" (Tydeman, 2022) involving small tests of change (Bryk et al., 2015). While testing a theory of change, NICs seek information about instances of the desired change—called Bright Spots—and variation in implementation (Bryk, 2016).

Over five years, our NSI partnered roughly 275 educators and administrators from 14 secondary schools in a large, urban school district with approximately 20 researchers from a large, public Mid-Atlantic research university. Our NSI's 14 partner schools served over 14,000 students, a majority of whom identified as Hispanic and/or African American (district demographic data utilized these descriptors). Other racial and ethnic categories represented less than five percent of the student population. The proportion of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in the 14 schools ranged from 75 to 95%, and emergent multilingual learners ranged from 15 to 70% of student populations. The NSI aimed to increase the number of "Black, Latine, English learners, and low-income students who were proficient in English Language Arts and on-track to be college and career ready" by focusing on student-centered literacy routines in ELA classrooms.

The NSI's Hub, a term for the managing team of a networked improvement community, was predominantly white and was led by co-principal investigators. Hub leaders selected university staff and graduate students, including the members of this research project, to form multiple Hub teams in support of research management and school-based professional development. Among the 188 ELA teachers working with the network during its third and fourth years, Hub leaders solicited teachers to participate in Bright Spots data collection and NSI knowledge dissemination based on two criteria—observed daily enactment of student-centered literacy routines and improved classroom-level standardized assessment scores.

Following a partner teacher's agreement to participate in Bright Spots, the Hub's Bright Spots Research Team conducted interviews with Bright Spots teachers to systematically document their implementation of student-centered routines and continuous improvement methods to investigate the *what* and *how* of their success. Findings were distributed to all NSI members. Bright Spots teachers presented and shared their lessons and examples of student work with colleagues at network trainings. NSI instructional coaches integrated lesson exemplars from Bright Spots teachers in professional learning communities (PLCs) and other teacher meetings.

Data Collection

For our current research project, we purposively built upon prior work with Bright Spots teachers by selecting the two rounds of semi-structured Bright Spots interviews (22 transcripts) that were most relevant to our research inquiries. These two rounds were selected from an extant dataset of four rounds of Bright Spots interviews (comprising over 40 transcripts). Whereas unselected interviews focused on continuous improvement methods and feedback for network quality assurance, the two selected inquiries spoke to humanizing pedagogy's emphasis on authentic, positive classroom relationships and teachers' critical engagement of students' racial and cultural identities. They also revealed tensions between education policies, organizational culture, and humanizing practices.

The first selected round of semi-structured interviews involved 10 Bright Spots teachers, who were asked to characterize their "relationships with students and the community that the school serves" and to reflect on how their "knowledge of students' culture, community, or home life impacted [their] classroom practices." The second set involved 12 Bright Spots teachers, who were asked questions like, "Why is it important to build relationships with students?" and "How do you humanize your classroom where students feel safe to take risks?" Four teachers participated in both interviews, bringing the total number of transcripts to 22 and the total number of interview participants to 18.

With the support of a Black male Hub leader, we initially conducted the selected interviews, via Zoom, between February 2022 and October 2022. Interviews ranged in duration from approximately 30 minutes to shortly over an hour in length. Participants (see Table 1) were 12 Black teachers, five white teachers, and one Hispanic/Latine teacher—reflective of the majority Black and female demographics of NSI teachers. While white females comprise almost 80% of the U.S. teaching force, NSI demographics partially reflected a trend found by the Institute of Education Sciences (Spiegelman, 2020): "Teachers of a given race/ethnicity were more often found in schools where their race/ethnicity matched a majority of the student body." This trend applied to NSI schools serving majority Black, but not majority Hispanic, student populations.

Researcher Positionalities

In addition to professional experience in fields outside of education, Thurston, Butler, and Compitello hold over 30 years of combined educator experience in ELA classroom teaching and instructional coaching in urban secondary schools resembling the NSI's partner schools. Specifically, Thurston (a white woman) and Compitello (a white man) are former teachers of both special education and ELA; Butler (a Black woman) continues to work in the field as a school administrator. A postdoctoral associate on the project,

Table 1. Demographic Information for Interview Sample of Bright Spots Teachers.

Pseudonym	School type	Years Exp[a]	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Interview Round[b]
Alejandra	High school	10+	Hispanic/Latinx	Woman	1, 2
Ashley	High school	2	White/Caucasian	Woman	2
Deion	High school	7	Black/African American	Man	1, 2
James	High school	22	Caucasian	Man	1, 2
Jamila	High school	4	Black/African American	Woman	2
Jasmine	High school	8	Black/African American	Woman	1
Latifa	High school	10	Black/African American	Woman	2
Mia	High school	8	Caucasian	Woman	1
Amara	Middle school	2	Black/African American	Woman	1
Amelia	Middle school	10+	Caucasian	Woman	2
Aiysha	Middle school	37	Black/African American	Woman	2
Aaliyah	Middle school	10+	Black/African American	Woman	1, 2
Cassandra	Middle school	10+	Black/African American	Woman	2
Charlotte	Middle school	3	Caucasian	Woman	2
Imani	Middle school	4	Black/African American	Woman	1
Rihanna	Middle school	8	Black/African American	Woman	1
Sanaa	Middle school	6	Black/African American	Woman	1
Tyrell	Middle school	10+	Black/African American	Man	2

[a]Years of educator experience: "10+" is an approximation to ensure participant confidentiality.
[b]Participation in both selected rounds of interviews is indicated by "1, 2."

Nguyen (an Asian American woman) is a critical educator by training. Our team's own schooling experiences were in contexts both similar and dissimilar to NSI partner schools. Nguyen and Compitello attended traditional public schools from K-12 in smaller cities that mirrored the racial and ethnic diversity of the NSI. Due to frequent relocations during her childhood, Butler attended different types of schools with varying demographic compositions, including two that resembled the NSI. Thurston completed her primary and secondary education with the same group of white classmates in a small, racially homogeneous, rural public school district.

In the short lifespan of the network, we worked in both similar and dissimilar Hub spaces. Whereas Thurston and Nguyen worked on the research-management side of the NSI, Butler and Compitello served as instructional coaches, visiting schools to support teachers in lesson planning and professional learning communities (PLCs). The latter two became trusted consultants to partner teachers, assisting with the design and implementation of student-centered lessons. Their coaching rapport, built across years of collaboration, had a positive influence on the openness of Bright Spots interviews—an inference substantiated by unsolicited statements of appreciation during teacher team and network meetings, as well as anonymous teacher surveys that found Hub coaches to be nonjudgmental, supportive, and collaborative.

Whereas we supported teachers in different roles, we also shared Hub membership in the Bright Spots Research Team and the Equity Team, with discourse focused on the connections between contexts of oppression and privilege for both teachers and students. These shared spaces revealed, interrogated, and strengthened our relational and ethical commitments to justice-driven systems change, which in turn shaped the design of our research. To prevent additional burden for partner teachers, whose participation in the NSI meant significant investments of time and energy beyond the school-day, we drew upon extant Bright Spots data. We committed to elevating teacher voice and, therefore, our writing departed from academic orthodoxy to feature direct quotes from our Bright Spots partners in multiple sections of the article. We do so to encourage a research perspective that respects teachers as agentic professionals and knowledge producers, worthy of deep listening from—and meaningful partnership with—administrators, researchers, and policymakers.

Finally, as we aim to embody the humanizing praxis that we study, several assumptions drove our analysis of the interplay between education policies and classroom practices. First, in an antiblack, cis-hetero patriarchal, stratified by design society, it is essential to examine power dynamics of consequential social constructs like race, gender, and class. Second, the complexity of interactions within and across classrooms, schools, and communities demands that we reject archetypal portrayals, flattened representations, and deficit orientations against both the individual and the group. Moreover, though principals and teachers must be mediators of policy (Shaked & Schechter, 2017; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977), public narratives of schools and teachers should not serve as scapegoat for longstanding political abdication of social welfare and ongoing oppression of marginalized communities (Benson, 2022).

Data Analysis

To triangulate analysis of Bright Spots interview data, we drew upon our Hub notes from school walk-throughs, classroom observations, network trainings, and instructional coaching in individual and team settings. We proceeded to code the 22 selected transcripts using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Initial coding prioritized in vivo coding as part of our commitment to elevate teacher voice. As we encountered increasing quantities of data, we moved between axial and selective coding using an iterative eclectic process (Saldaña, 2021), identifying and analyzing instances of teacher experiences and beliefs that spoke to one or more research inquiries. We subsumed codes into categories and pulled specific quotes to formulate teacher profiles in a document dedicated to collective brainstorming and collaborative thematic analysis. Thurston took the lead on data analysis, but because we met on a weekly basis to fulfill a range of Hub responsibilities, we were able to regularly confer with one another on insights and lingering questions about our methods and emergent themes.

Butler and Compitello's notes from classroom observations and coaching experiences, as well as the entire team's observations of Bright Spots presentations and teacher discourse in network-wide trainings, facilitated our discussion of emergent themes. For example, we triangulated interview excerpts with observed teacher discourse, such as voiced disagreement with supervisory directives or elements of curriculum in PLCs. Butler and Compitello's notes from classroom observations of Bright Spots teachers' practices also affirmed the data narratives emerging from interviews related to humanizing pedagogy. Overall, our backgrounds as educators pushed us to explore the tensions of teachers' (1) perceptions of autonomy and agency in instruction, (2) beliefs about classroom social dynamics, (3) practices of humanizing pedagogy, and (4) perceived influences on student learning, which we discuss at length below.

Findings

Three sets of findings correspond to our four research inquiries. First, we describe teachers' relational beliefs and instructional choices, a synthesis of two inquiries that reflects the complex interactions of classrooms. Then, we celebrate the positive influences of humanizing pedagogies in ELA classrooms. Finally, we discuss elements of education policy, organizational structure, and culture that mediate classroom implementation of humanizing pedagogy.

Foundations of Humanizing Praxis: Positive, Meaningful Relationships

All partner teachers agreed that fostering healthy relationships was vital for: (1) identifying students' academic and social-emotional strengths and needs, (2) facilitating student-to-student collaboration, and (3) empowering students as learners. Humanizing pedagogies were evident in teachers' cultivation and enhancement of positive relationships with and among students, driven by teachers' understanding of students' complex identities.

Trusting Relationships for Mutual Accountability in the Classroom. Humanizing pedagogy begins with the belief that teachers need to know their students to cultivate healthy classroom relationships. High school teacher Alejandra noted that if teachers "come with the perspective of 'I respect you as a human being, I want you to do well, and I ask for the same in return', then… You set up the stage" for trust to happen within teacher-student relationships. Trust, she added, is what fuels a productive learning environment: "If you build relationships, they are understanding, 'I trust you to teach me what I need to learn, and… I'm not doing something that is without purpose'." Middle school teacher Amelia similarly described an imperative to establish healthy relationships for student motivation: "Relationships are really important…because, especially in middle school, if they…don't know that you care about them and their success, then they don't see a purpose or a reason for being in your classroom."

Establishing trustworthiness is a teacher's "obligation," asserted high school teacher James, stressing it is what encourages students to take intellectual risks and communicate openly and honestly: "Relationships are the most important thing when it comes to working with kids… When the student knows your only goal is their enrichment, they're comfortable… telling you when they're struggling with something." Middle school teachers Cassandra and Imani agreed that relationship-building must reach the point where students "feel comfortable" approaching teachers "about anything."

Establishing trustworthiness, middle school teacher Charlotte determined, depends on being open, caring, and empathetic. This began with examining her own perceptions:

> I try my very hardest to view behavior as a need that's being communicated. Especially in the first few weeks of school when the kids are sizing you up and trying to figure out, "Does this lady care about me? Does she understand me?"

In concurrence with Charlotte, high school teacher Latifa stated, "I create that non-judgment zone because our students need to feel like someone's being non-judgmental. Because the world judges them so much about everything." High school teacher Mia expanded on her approach to establishing students' sense of psychological safety: "Kids are… figuring themselves out every single day, and so what's important is that *you* are not something else that they are figuring out… Then your kids are going to respond because you become safe." Teacher transparency, authenticity, and consistency, Mia asserted, is the foundation of a productive classroom.

Whereas teachers consistently earned students' trust and respect through an ethic of care that modeled trust and respect

for students, various instructional practices supported their aims. For example, for the first months of the schoolyear, middle school teacher Tyrell allowed his students to choose their own peer-group because "you have to build their trust." As students "get used to being in the class," Tyrell was constantly "watching and learning," slowly making changes. By the second semester, he felt confident grouping peers strategically, noting, "everybody knows everybody" and "how to get along with everyone." While offering student choice in a meaningful way can develop students' agency, autonomy, and confidence, it also implicitly models the teacher's trust and respect for students.

Middle school teacher Charlotte explicitly recognized the dignity of her students. In class, she articulated, "The work that you do, the ideas that you have individually and with your peers are valued and interesting and unique." She reinforced this sentiment with "words of affirmation, whether it's just a quick thing in their journals, like, 'Hey, I'm super proud of you for *xyz* this week'. I'm looking for as many opportunities as possible to praise." Affirmations help students develop a sense of belonging, signaling that their efforts, diverse perspectives, and experiences are valued—contributing to a community of trust and respect.

As part of their efforts to build a trauma-informed classroom, high school teachers Latifa (see Table 2) and Jamila discussed the hardships of their own childhoods with their students. Jamila jumpstarts this process at the beginning of every schoolyear with a letter writing exercise:

> I write a personal letter to my students [about] my home life as a child, my family situation,... celebrations, also the lows in my life… like the loss of my brother. Then, I have the students write me a letter back. Naturally, students… include those same things.

Jamila responds to student letters with words of encouragement and understanding. The exchange, she explained, fosters "a better connection," allowing her to be thoughtful and sensitive when communicating with students and caregivers. Like so many of her colleagues, middle school teacher Imani asserted that showing interest in students and their lives outside of school is just another way to show respect and care, "treating [students] like the human beings that they are…" Teachers' enhanced knowledge of students' identities, home life, and background directly facilitated their culturally responsive instruction and, as Imani emphasized, "holding students accountable to high standards."

Overall, humanizing pedagogies affirm and honor students' *complex personhood* (Gordon, 2008) to serve a rigorous learning environment. Bright Spots teachers first established themselves as trustworthy adults by modeling emotional intelligence, respect, trust, authenticity, and openness. Their ethic of care demonstrated interest in students and a thoughtful responsiveness to what they learned. With consistent holistic support for students, Bright Spots teachers cultivated an inclusive community in which students knew they were seen, heard, and valued—encouraging students to reciprocate ethically and to embrace cognitive challenge.

Reflexivity and Responsiveness to Empower Students. Humanizing pedagogy is about offering learning opportunities that, as many Bright Spots teachers stated, "meet students where they are" to authentically engage students and bolster autonomy. Teachers operationalized an expansive and inclusive notion of intellectual rigor through the differentiation of instruction based on students' cultural, linguistic, cognitive, and social-emotional characteristics. Among Bright Spots teachers, Black teachers often explicitly emphasized cultural responsiveness. Middle school teacher Aiysha shared, "I always look at my roster and figure out what identities are here that I feel need to be recognized. And if we can't recognize it every day, we'll make it a special day." Middle school teacher Aaliyah, who worked with predominantly Hispanic students, worked to bridge perceived racialized differences: "Because I don't look like most of my students, they need to know that I am intentional. They need to know that I want to get to know them, and I want to learn about them." Other teachers built upon perceived similarities, such as high school teacher Deion, who thoughtfully incorporated social identities in curriculum and lesson planning:

> A lot of the things that I've encountered are what they encounter, so I never forget that… Students get really passionate about race. They have a lot to say… [My text selections] gave them the platform to get some feelings off of their chest, get some thoughts out.

Consideration of the linguistic strengths and needs of emergent multilingual learners (EMLs) was also evident in instruction. Amelia noted, "I'm constantly learning and changing my approach, letting [EMLs] annotate in Spanish and then type their answer in English or talk to me in Spanish." "Seating's significant," Tyrell reflected. "If there are other students in the classroom who speak Spanish, I'll start with pair-share or small group [so] they're able to share with people who can understand both languages." Scaffolding language, tiered assignments, and strategic use of technology and grouping were common ways teachers differentiated instruction based on language proficiency—creating more active and relevant learning opportunities for EMLs.

To promote active participation, confidence, collaboration, and critical thinking through a consistent, structured, supportive manner, Bright Spots teachers also implemented student-centered routines (e.g., think pair shares, quick writes, task sheets, charting, gallery walks). Deion observed, "Charting stands out because that's where I saw a lot of collaboration." He expanded, "Quick writes and group discussion contribute to charting, but the charting is what gives

Table 2. Teacher Vignette – Interview Excerpt.

High school teacher Latifa discussed why she grounds her classroom in trauma-informed practice.
Kids need an example of how to balance emotions. Because they're just little people trying to balance them… So I have to take time to get to know my students better. I need to know where kids come from. Whether they're in a single parent home and what parent that is. I need to know if they are being raised by their grandparents. It wouldn't be fitting to say, "Well, your mom or dad," when that's not who they live with… They're going to be less likely to do work for you, or to even engage with you, when you are not invested in who they are as a person. That's what I learned in my research and as an educator for 10 years. Kids are more likely to work [when they] love the subject, but if they don't have that sense of security with an educator, they're not gonna be forthcoming… It doesn't take much time to sit and ask, "How's your home life?" Not in a nosy type of way but an authentic, "I care about you" type of way…
I always do it by telling them my background. I tell my students I wasn't raised by my parents. I was in the system. I was in foster care, etc… If I start with authenticity, my students are like, "Okay she's a real teacher. She's being honest about her life, so I can tell her about mine, and she's not judging me." I will be able to tell, "This kid is not okay. All right, now we don't need to focus on English. We need to focus on making sure you're okay."
Because of COVID, they missed interaction with their peers… So the first couple of months of school, they were overwhelmed with just the emotions. And not understanding why grown-ups were expecting them to act a certain way when they hadn't been around anyone. They just needed someone to say, "Let it out. It is okay. You're overwhelmed. I'm overwhelmed." They're like, "Can we really scream?" I'm like, "Yes, let it out." Because everyone needs a person to say, "It's okay for you to cry." …Because you're *human*. I feel like so much of what is human in education has been stripped… When I'm reading the stories, I indulge… so they can see me go through the emotions. If I am sad about something, I don't hide that from them because they need to see me be human. So they know they have permission to be human.

real ownership because it displays [students' thinking] for other students to see." Similarly, Mia described both charting and gallery walks as "essentially publishing knowledge, allowing kids to see and engage in other people's work, then evaluate their own based on what they've seen. That step is where I see the most authentic engagement." Student-centered literacy practices demand active engagement in questioning, discussion, analysis, and interpretation. Where collaboration is required in student-centered routines, students are simultaneously asked to practice the robust relational ethics modeled by the teacher's humanizing pedagogy.

The efficacy of student-centered routines, Charlotte observed, depends on creating "a culture in a classroom that's respectful of different viewpoints, respectful of different cultures, different backgrounds." This culture, she added, encourages students "to trust themselves," "trust their classmates," "take risks," and "be independent." When teachers develop positive relationships with and among students, make learning meaningful and relevant, and respond to learning needs and interests, they empower students as both individual learners and agentic members of the community. As humanizing pedagogy builds peer accountability, the social dynamics and the intellectual rigor of the classroom are strengthened in mutually reinforcing ways. This is the focus of our second set of findings.

Celebrations of Humanizing Praxis: Enhanced Learning Processes and Outcomes

Bright Spots teachers perceived humanizing pedagogy to be a catalyst of improved individual learning as well as the flourishing of *classroom as community*. Although we aim to disabuse our readers of the notion that quality and equity of education should be construed through the lens of decontextualized standardized assessments, we also recognize the public education system's compulsory engagement with standardized data. Thus, we emphasize Bright Spots teachers' successes with *classroom as community* but also speak briefly to dominant norms in our effort to build solidarity and momentum around humanizing praxis.

Cycles of Student Engagement and Teacher Responsiveness. Humanizing pedagogy lends itself to a continuous improvement cycle based on the interconnections of relational ethics, student engagement, and teacher reflexivity. The foundations of a positive classroom culture may enhance students' classroom participation. If teachers assess and respond to students in real time (and reflexively plan), then it is reasonable to expect both professional growth and student growth from humanizing pedagogy.

Indeed, across the board, Bright Spots teachers described students participating and taking ownership over learning because, as Deion ascertained, "Teachers allow students to just bring themselves to the classroom, so students feel like they belong, and students are part of the lesson." Ashley shared that collaboration and feedback loops improved students' participation. She delineated how starting with individual or small group tasks, like *think-pair-share* and *turn and talk*, built confidence toward whole class discussion:

> You go through your own thought process. I might check it, make a little comment. Then you go through it with a partner. [They] hear your ideas and make …comments. You add ideas. By the time you go to your small group, you're feeling pretty good. By the time you go to the large group, you've gone through so many steps, you're more confident.

Bright Spots teachers also took advantage of increased participation to assess student learning, provide feedback,

and adapt instruction accordingly. For example, as collaborative, student-centered routines worked to elevate student agency and engagement in Mia's classroom, she gained a better sense of students' thought processes and levels of text comprehension. Mia asserted, "Charting it, publishing it, watching them go back to revisit it… really helps to identify where the misconceptions are. I will have five posters with five different misconceptions that I didn't plan for."

Whereas the humanizing pedagogy of Bright Spots teachers yielded high levels of student engagement, several teachers explicitly linked student-centered culture to students' intellectual growth. Middle school teacher Sanaa noticed a qualitative difference in her class's text comprehension and literary analysis. She mentioned, "Students are able to see those big ideas more clearly and relate them to the novel. Students are digging deeper into the novel to find layered ideas." Sanaa further explained, "Students push each other to think more" and stretch beyond "the very first surface-level idea that they come up with"—comfortable with one another as a result of the supportive learning environment and interested in the lesson as a result of the culturally relevant texts and student-centered routines.

Rihanna described how peer accountability and student authority over texts connected to critical thinking: "They have to talk in their groups about *why* they chose an answer," she reported. "Everybody has to find the evidence, like, 'What made you choose your answer?' especially when they can't come to a consensus." Deion also observed richer text-based discussions: "One thing that I saw a lot of, that I hadn't seen before, was students relying on their textual evidence to support their thoughts. They have different interpretations… They gain something that another student might not." Likewise, Jamila connected the co-construction of ideas to enhanced critical thinking: "Students are… collaborating with others and revamping. Sometimes you may have different answers, and being able to talk about those differences has helped learning." Dialogic, text-based inquiry requires students to reflect on their own viewpoints as well as those of their peers, promoting deeper thinking about texts and topics.

Humanizing pedagogy enhances and encompasses the constructivist approach to learning by establishing a positive classroom culture that is supportive of critical thought, nuanced analysis, and argumentation. The relational ethics of humanizing pedagogy empower students to question personal assumptions, challenge one another's ideas, and consider multiple perspectives. Along with mutual accountability for intellectual rigor, the emphasis on process and growth—rather than a final product or assessment—helps to normalize mistakes and augment constructive feedback.

Standardized Achievement Goals. At the middle school level, the state standardized ELA test scores of Bright Spots classrooms showed, on average, greater growth than non-NSI peers across the district. Tyrell remarked, "I did notice a difference, and the scores were a little better… I felt like they were better because of the process of being intentional and doing comprehension first." Middle school teacher Rihanna observed, "Last year, our 'do not meets' was so high. We were at 70%… on the [state standardized assessment]. By mid-year that 70% went to 40%… To see those students grow, it was just great." At the high school level, Latifa reflected on conversations with students who had approached her after completing the state standardized assessment. Latifa judged her biggest success to be students' argumentative reasoning, especially their construction of counterarguments: "I don't have to see their scores to know they are successful. I know they are successful because of what they told me,… the information they have learned in class." Though our research questions the use of assessment structures within the context of new managerialism, we celebrate teachers for their dedication to student achievement. The third and final set of findings, however, delves into specific factors of organizational structure and culture that teachers perceived as hindrances to humanizing praxis.

Barriers to Humanizing Praxis

Bright Spots teachers experienced at least three adverse influences on humanizing praxis. First, a combination of assessment policies and school-level expectations for test preparation reduced the actual class time available for student-centered instruction. Second, school-level decisions to implement either district-designed or district-selected ELA curriculum decreased teachers' instructional autonomy. Third, professional development topics and routines in department, PLC, and lesson-planning meetings reinforced the curriculum's granular focus on standards at the expense of teachers' holistic education objectives.

Too Much Testing, Not Enough Time for Meaningful Instruction. Bright Spots teachers expressed the belief that their students were tested too often. They felt that testing policies were either ignorant or dismissive of teachers' and students' experiences and perspectives. High school teacher Jasmine, an experienced teacher who had taught outside of the state and in different types of schools, voiced a common teacher frustration:

> I've never been in a situation that tests the students so much… For a whole nine weeks we had more testing days than teaching days… Every three weeks, we have a test. Then every six weeks… Then the [State College Readiness Assessment], SAT, ACT, [English Language Proficiency Test], then [ELA State Standardized Test]. They tried to make us do two mock [ELA State Tests] but my instructional coach got us out of that.

Considering the cultural and structural emphasis on tested standards and the frequency of test administrations, veteran teacher James surmised:

> Historically, we have increasingly moved away from intimacy in the classroom. This testing thing is not what the students need. They don't need to be tested every two or three weeks. It's not building anything. If anything, it makes the kids a little more frightened to challenge themselves.

For many Bright Spots teachers, a constant barrage of assessments created a stressful testing culture. This disrupted the flow of student-centered instruction and interfered with teachers' efforts to cultivate a positive learning environment grounded in meaningful relationships.

A Prescribed Curriculum, Limited Teacher Autonomy. There were variations across the 14 schools of the network in terms of (a) district mandates for schools to adopt district-designed or district-selected ELA curriculum and pacing calendars, (b) school-level enforcement of district mandates, and (c) degree of teacher compliance. Where teachers were handed a curriculum and given directives to follow the script, Bright Spots teachers voiced concerns that the curriculum did not afford sufficient attention to the perspectives and needs of the classroom. Aaliyah asserted, "As teachers, we aren't empowered to make decisions because there's always someone else who's making those curriculum decisions. But [District Officials] are not with my kids in my classroom every day!" The perceived disregard for teacher's professionalism, for Aailyah, correlated with classroom conditions that were not conducive to learning. Mia concurred with this sentiment: "Not to be super cliche, but [the State and District] are not listening to us. And ...you should be listening to us when we tell you kids are upset. They are not okay. We need to fix that."

Among those who explicitly articulated concern for the high degree of centralized decision-making, the majority perceived that the structure or content of ELA curriculum diminished their ability to address the unique strengths, needs, and interests of students. For example, Mia argued that the rigidity and granularity of the curriculum interfered with student-centered routines and culturally sustaining pedagogy, concluding: "[State] standards… are so very specific. How we assess those are so very specific. We have lots and lots of structure and lots and lots of assessments," leaving little room for teachers to be responsive. Aaliyah added:

> When we talk about equity and literature, it starts with the type of literature that we're putting in front of them. [Students] have to see themselves… A lot of times or sometimes, because of this curriculum that is given to us, we just go through the motions.

In addition to the authority to select texts based on the unique characteristics of her own class, Aaliyah desired a more coherent sequence to text-based inquiries: "The curriculum is not the best… especially when it comes in with an analysis task or an interpretation task but skips comprehension." As new teacher Amara explained, her teacher team decided to depart from the district curriculum because it was test-centric:

> … we [selected] very interesting texts, and it was apparent to me how students reacted differently to the questions we were giving them… instead of, like, "What changes can be made in paragraph 2? What's the plot development in this story?"—which is… all they were used to. My students even said all they had to do [before] was read the question and the specific area that the question was talking about. They never had to read the whole text. That's when we were like, "Okay, we have to do something different."

Bright Spots teachers determined district curriculum adversely affected responsiveness to students' identities, interests, and needs due to the curriculum's (a) narrowed selection of texts (insufficient exposure to diverse literary genres and forms of expression / limited cultural responsiveness), (b) reliance on text excerpts (insufficient exposure to whole texts / limited intellectual engagement), (c) focus on tested standards (reduced opportunities for creativity, self-expression, interdisciplinary and real-world applications), and (d) weak scaffolding of the cognitive load (inconsistent sequencing of comprehension, interpretation, and analysis tasks).

A Professional Learning Culture of Assessment and Compliance. The pressure of performance expectations, like the loss of instructional autonomy, permeated district culture. In many ways, teachers' professional development experience mirrored that of their students' classroom experience, warped by rushed pacing and narrowed learning opportunities. There was marked stress related to job security and cognitive dissonance accompanying instructional choices. Ashley stated, "Last year, I felt such intense pressure all the time… to be teaching the lesson exactly as [Principal's Supervisor] sent it to me, even though it didn't work for my kids." Aiysha remarked, "Sometimes I hold them (students) back because I need to get it (the lesson) done a certain way for the district," adding that she doesn't always adhere to district curriculum—which "doesn't bode well for [teacher evaluations]."

Stress was also apparent in teacher teams that received administrative directives that went against teachers' core beliefs. For example, Deion described an administrative pressure to focus on standardized assessments during common planning meetings:

> Instead of taking the time to just sit and plan and think about how we can best support students, [we] have to focus more on [State Tests]… I don't want to blame it all on testing, but a lot of it is testing and just requirements that teachers have to go through.

Like many Bright Spots teachers, James desired to incorporate asset-based pedagogy into PLCs, rather than focus strictly on areas for growth:

> I've never noticed a kid that fits neatly into a data set. People don't work that way… [District] wants us to isolate what they call

high-leverage [State Standards]... And I'll say, "Okay, but what are the ones where they do well, you know?"

Overall, the professional development activities of Bright Spots teachers portrayed a stark discrepancy between organizational cultures that empower teachers and organizational cultures that stymie professional autonomy. Schools that allowed teachers to take ownership of their professional growth and trusted them to make decisions about their instruction also tended to value humanizing praxis and support teachers' pursuit of holistic education goals. Schools driven by the assessment and accountability system tended to enforce the standardization of curriculum and instruction, diminishing the learning experiences of both teachers and students.

Discussion

This case study of 18 Bright Spots ELA teachers who partnered with a Network for School Improvement sought to understand pedagogical beliefs, instructional practices, and their influences on student learning relative to humanizing pedagogy. This aim included identification and analysis of barriers to humanizing pedagogy. Our findings suggest that a rigidly hierarchical organizational structure and compliance culture, coupled with an intense instructional focus on standards and standardized assessments, are distinct impediments to humanizing education. These findings align with other critical education reflections on dominant neoliberal ideology and new managerialism. Among other influences, the ongoing conflation of "reduction in group performance discrepancies on high-stakes tests" with "progress toward educational equity and excellence" may (a) mask structural inequalities that require institutions' sustained consideration and concerted investments in communities, (b) detract from school efforts to address manifestations of structural inequalities in schools, (c) promote a test-centric school culture that positions students and teachers as mechanistic actors, and (d) amplify the "myth of meritocracy," an unrealistic view that achievement is based solely on individual skill and work ethic (Au, 2016; Batruch et al., 2023; Mijs, 2016).

In juxtaposition, the variations of resistance to dominant norms across the classrooms of Bright Spots teachers suggested there are great cognitive, social, and emotional benefits to (a) prioritizing positive classroom relationships, (b) honoring and responding to the complex, multifaceted identities of students, and (c) centering students' strengths, needs, interests, and aspirations in instruction. Although these findings are not novel, our work is notable in that it contributes to burgeoning education research advocacy, which calls for our educational institutions to embody a *humanizing culture* to facilitate *humanizing praxis*. Bright Spots teachers brought to life visions of holistic education—despite or because of the institutional barriers they faced. Their cultivation of joyful, student-centered, and culturally responsive classrooms is the fuel for education systems change. Toward this ultimate end, we offer three implications for future study and struggle.

Humanizing the Structure of Schooling

First, while we remain mindful that *vulnerabilized* (Patel, 2015) communities face risks, burdens, and other difficulties in gaining access to policymaking spheres, we invite and encourage caregivers and community members to demand humanizing education for all children. Students and educators should have the most consequential voice in education policymaking, and we honor those in our partner district who called for the interrogation or elimination of high-stakes standardized tests as currently utilized in public education. For a start, Au (2016) outlined, schools can elect to formulate more authentic and meaningful assessments of learning, such as portfolio defenses, and caregivers may opt-out of standardized assessments when schools fail to offer options. Conversely, we encourage federal and state policymakers, as well as district and school administrators involved in continuous improvement work, to listen deeply and respond compassionately to teacher, student, and caregiver perspectives (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2017).

Humanizing the Culture of Schooling

Second, as James remarked, "There is damage that has been done on a professional level to the adults that also has to be undone, before they (teachers) can undo it for the kids." Bright Spots teachers are not alone in the struggle for professional autonomy and support in education. Since before the COVID-19 pandemic, large-scale education surveys have reported higher levels of job-related stress for American teachers and principals compared to other professions—especially among female employees (Doan et al., 2024). We raise the point of job-related stress to emphasize the importance of intentionally developing and maintaining a positive work environment. Therefore, we invite fellow researchers, especially those engaged in research-practice partnerships, to focus on humanizing professional learning communities as an essential component of humanizing school culture (Antinluoma et al., 2018). Though we are mindful of conflicting demands and the ever-fleeting resource of time, we encourage education leaders—district administrators, especially—to prioritize the utilization of a wide and meaningful range of data in continuous improvement work. Administrators can model trust by democratizing leadership and inviting teachers to set their own norms for developing reflexive, collaborative, joyful, and supportive PLCs (Lotan et al., 2019).

Humanizing Classroom Pedagogy

Third, humanizing praxis, as Latifa mentioned, depends on a notion of rigor that includes responsiveness to the nuances of

individual students and the dynamic relationality of the learning environment: "No matter what level you teach, if you do not know your students' demographics and their personal environment, you cannot serve their needs… Every child is different, so what kids need to be successful will not be the same." Extrapolating from Latifa's reflections, we encourage teachers and teacher teams to support one another in critical, collaborative curriculum review and revision, instructional observations, and reflexivity in varied modes of professional learning. Already, a plethora of frameworks align to humanizing praxis, for example, culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010; Hammond, 2015), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014), abolitionist teaching (Love, 2019), culturally and historically responsive literacy (Muhammad & Love, 2020), and—focusing more on neurodiversity—universal design for learning (CAST, 2011). As is the case with humanizing school culture, there is potential for the research-practice partnership to support these processes.

Limitations and Caveats

As the data did not include direct interaction with students, our analysis focused on the role of the teacher as knowledge producer, rather than elevating student voice. This study was conducted in a politically conservative state that utilized a pay-for-performance program for educators and imposed policy restrictions related to topics of diversity, equity and inclusion. The political climate of the state likely influenced how open teachers felt about sharing their humanizing pedagogies and, more generally, educator perceptions and experiences. Though the teacher sample size was small, the findings were supported by the larger research efforts of the Network for School Improvement. Nonetheless, teachers are complex human beings, both competent and fallible, facilitators of and resistors to change, interacting with other complex human beings in their school communities—all of whom are influenced by structures and norms that shape and are shaped by broader spheres of the social ecology. Even within the briefest of temporal contexts, such as one lesson, it may be impractical—if not unrealistic—to account for all forces acting on human thought and behavior. Regardless of these caveats, future research should examine the generalizability of findings within other contexts of American schooling, especially those with different populations (student or teacher) or organizational norms.

A Final Reflection on Systems Change

We empathize with practitioners and researchers, who—like Charlotte—feel they are "a cog in a massive machine that was invented long ago." Working for change against structural social inequalities—and their different logics—is a project far more massive in scope than any one person or organization. The critical researcher holds an onus of responsibility in this broader ontological campaign, including community-engaged critiques of dominant ideologies, systems, and structures, as well as explorations of subjugated knowledges that may inform mobilization and action. In our collective pursuit of a more just and equitable society, we recognize and appreciate the transformative power of individual teachers and their humanizing praxis. Their communities are strengthened by the love and joy they bring to the classroom. Let us all be strengthened and inspired to work intentionally for this positive change—small ripples may grow into a tidal wave of humanizing impact.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study is supported by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

ORCID iD

Emily Thurston https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3637-0937

References

Ali, S. (2019). A second-class workforce: How neoliberal policies and reforms undermined the educational profession. *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching*, *8*(3), 102–110. https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v8n3p102

Antinluoma, M., Ilomaki, L., Lahti-Nuuttila, P., & Toom, A. (2018). Schools as professional learning communities. *Journal of Education and Learning*, *7*(5), 76–91. https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v7n5p76

Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Educational Researcher*, *36*(5), 258–267. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07306523

Au, W. (2016). Meritocracy 2.0: High-stakes, standardized testing as a racial project of neoliberal multiculturalism. *Educational Policy*, *30*(1), 39–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904815614916

August, D., & Slama, R. (2016). *Literature review related to assessment and accountability provisions relevant to English learners (ED601049)*. US Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition.

Baker, E. L., Barton, P. E., Darling-Hammond, L., Haertel, E., Ladd, H. F., Linn, R. L., Ravitch, D., Rothstein, R., Shavelson, R. J., & Shepard, L. (2010). *Problems with the use of student test scores to evaluate teachers (EPI Briefing Paper No. 278)*. Economic Policy Institute. https://files.epi.org/page/-/pdf/bp278.pdf

Batruch, A., Jetten, J., Van de Werfhorst, H., Darnon, C., & Butera, F. (2023). Belief in school meritocracy and the legitimization of social and income inequality. *Social Psychological and*

Personality Science, *14*(5), 621–635. https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506221111017

Benson, K. E. (2022). Conventional wisdom and popular (mis) understanding of "failing schools.". *Journal of Education and Learning*, *11*(6), 1. https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v11n6p1

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Harvard University Press.

Bryk, A. S. (2016). *What is the essential nature of "Bright Spots"?* Carnegie commons. https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/blog/what-is-the-essential-nature-of-bright-spots

Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press.

CAST. (2011). Universal design for learning guidelines version 2.0. https://udlguidelines.cast.org/

Datnow, A., Lockton, M., & Weddle, H. (2020). Redefining or reinforcing accountability? An examination of meeting routines in schools. *Journal of Educational Change*, *21*(1), 109–134. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-019-09349-z

de Saxe, J. G., Bucknovitz, S., & Mahoney-Mosedale, F. (2020). The deprofessionalization of educators: An intersectional analysis of neoliberalism and education "reform.". *Education and Urban Society*, *52*(1), 51–69. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124518786398

Doan, S., Steiner, E. D., Woo, A., & Pandey, R. (2024). *Teacher well-being and intentions to leave in 2024: Findings from the 2024 state of the American teacher survey [RR-A1108-12]*. RAND. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1108-12.html

Emler, T. E., Zhao, Y., Deng, J., Yin, D., & Wang, Y. (2019). Side effects of large-scale assessments in education. *ECNU Review of Education*, *2*(3), 279–296. https://doi.org/10.1177/2096531119878964

Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin Random House.

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Transaction Publishers.

Gordon, A. (2008). *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*. University of Minnesota Press.

Guenther, A. R. (2021). "It should be helping me improve, not telling me I'm a bad teacher": The influence of accountability-focused evaluations on teachers' professional identities. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *108*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103511

Gunzenhauser, M. G. (2006). Normalizing the educated subject: A foucaultian analysis of high-stakes accountability. *Educational Studies*, *39*(3), 241–259. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326993es3903_4

Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin / Sage.

Hargreaves, A., & O'Connor, M. T. (2017). Cultures of professional collaboration: Their origins and opponents. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, *2*(2), 74–85. https://doi.org/10.1108/jpcc-02-2017-0004

Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

Hsieh, B. (2022). Making space for ourselves, making space for each other: Humanizing practices in the ELA classroom and in teacher education. In E. Dutro (Ed.), *Trauma-informed teaching: Responsive, humanizing classrooms* (Volume 2). National Council of Teachers of English Special Issues Series.

Johnson, L. L., Bryan, N., & Boutte, G. (2019). Show us the love: Revolutionary teaching in (un)critical times. *The Urban Review*, *51*(1), 46–64. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-018-0488-3

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, *32*(3), 465–491. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312032003465

Legette, K. B., Rogers, L. O., & Warren, C. A. (2022). Humanizing student–teacher relationships for Black children: Implications for teachers' social–emotional training. *Urban Education*, *57*(2), 278–288. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920933319

Lotan, R. A., Burns, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2019). *The Instructional Leadership Corps: Entrusting professional learning in the hands of the profession*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/instructional-leadership-corps-professional-learning-report

Love, B. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon Press.

Lynch, K. (2014). New managerialism: The impact on education. *Conceptus*, *5*(3), 11. https://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/article/view/2421/3544

Mehta, J. (2015). *The allure of order*. Oxford University Press.

Mijs, J. J. B. (2016). The unfulfillable promise of meritocracy: Three lessons and their implications for justice in education. *Social Justice Research*, *29*(1), 14–34. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-014-0228-0

Milner, H. R. (2013). *Policy reforms and de-professionalization of teaching*. National Education Policy Center. https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/policy-reforms-deprofessionalization

Muhammad, G., & Love, B. L. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. Scholastic Inc.

Nelson Mandela University. (2020). Humanising pedagogy. *Learning and teaching*. https://lt.mandela.ac.za/

Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, *84*(1), 85–100. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.84.1.982l873k2ht16m77

Patel, L. (2015). Nationalist narratives, immigration and coloniality. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*. https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2015/09/17/nationalist-narratives-immigration-and-coloniality/

Ramlackhan, K. (2019). Restricting social justice practices in public education: The neoliberal stronghold. In R. Papa (Ed), *Handbook on promoting social justice in education*. Springer.

Ravitch, D. (2020). *Slaying Goliath: The passionate resistance to privatization and the fight to save America's public schools*. Alfred A. Knopf.

Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications Limited.

Shaked, H., & Schechter, C. (2017). School principals as mediating agents in education reforms. *School Leadership & Management*, *37*(1–2), 19–37. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2016.1209182

Shepard, L. (2015). *Serving two masters: Can accountability testing be made instructionally relevant?* Colorado Association of School Boards. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2m66PUMyY10

Shepherd, S. (2018). Managerialism: An ideal type. *Studies in Higher Education*, *43*(9), 1668–1678. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1281239

Spiegelman, M. (2020). *Race and ethnicity of public school teachers and their students (NCES 2020-103)*. US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020103.pdf

Tuck, E., & Yang, W. (2018). *Toward what justice? Describing diverse dreams of justice in education*. Taylor & Francis.

Tydeman, C. (2022). Using networked improvement communities to address problems of practice. *IES Regional Educational Laboratory Program*. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/pacific/Blog/100683#f2

Weatherley, R., & Lipsky, M. (1977). Street-level bureaucrats and institutional innovation: Implementing special-education reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, *47*(2), 171–197. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.47.2.v870r1v16786270x