

In the Pursuit of Justice

STUDENTS' RIGHTS TO READ AND WRITE IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



EDITED BY
MARIANA SOUTO-MANNING

Principles
in Practice

STUDENTS' RIGHTS
TO READ AND WRITE

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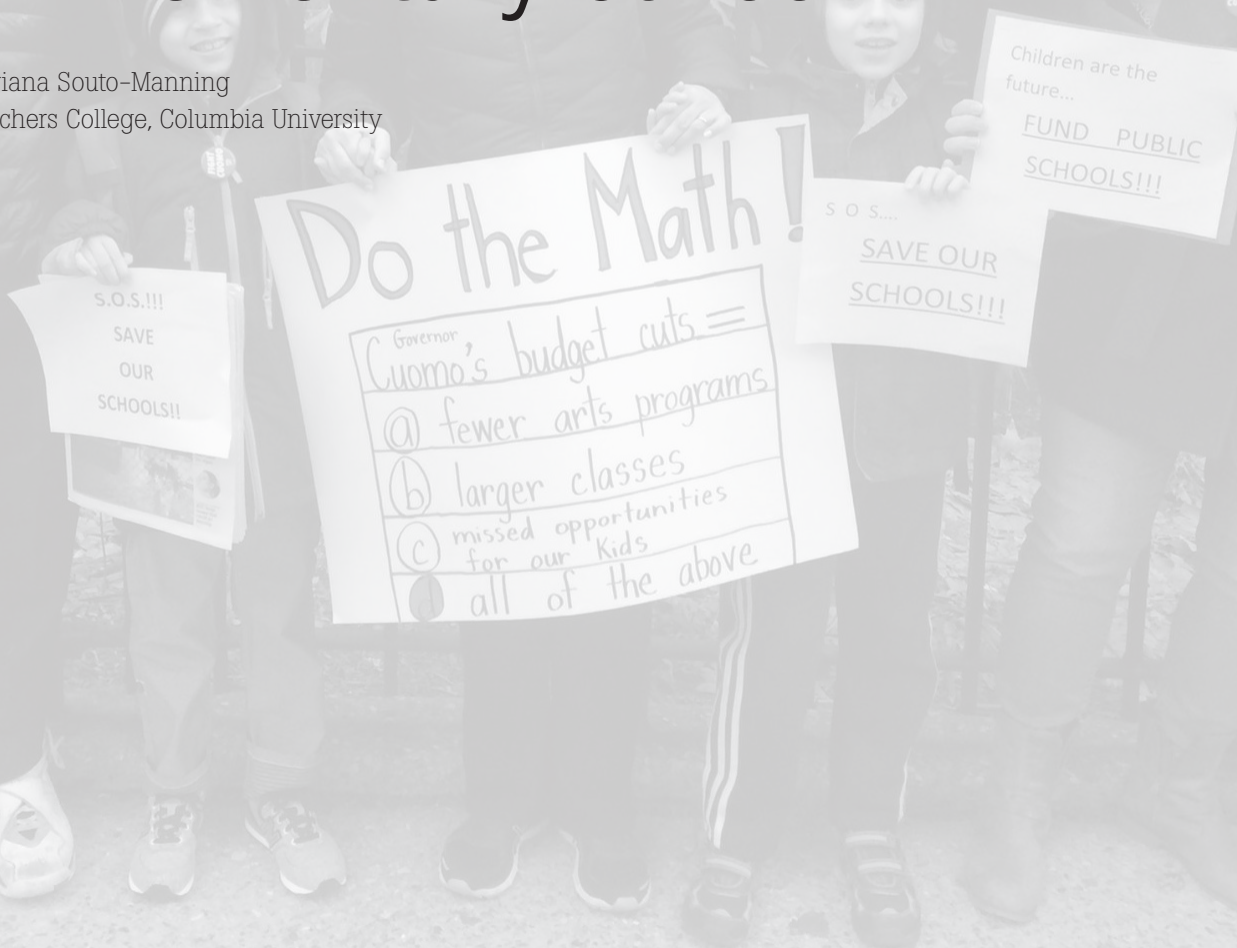
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Part I

Teaching in the Pursuit of Justice: Students' Rights to Read and Write in Elementary School

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During this era of high-stakes testing . . . and increased control over students' expression . . . students' right[s] to [read and] write must be protected. Censorship of [reading and] writing not only stifles student voices but denies students important opportunities to grow as . . . [readers,] writers and thinkers.

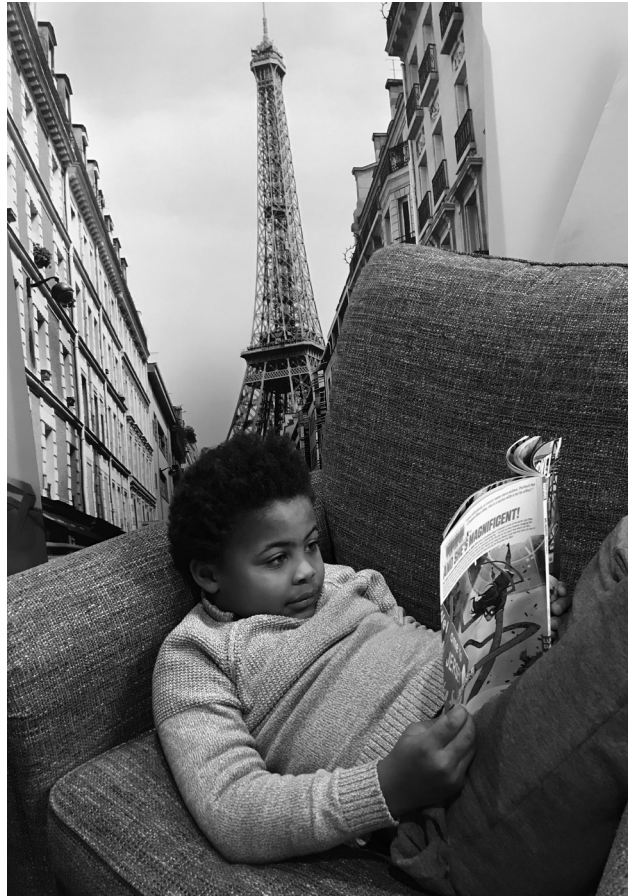
—NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write (2014)

Students have the rights to read and write . . . from the earliest grades. Even before stringing symbols together to make meaning and decoding words written in books, young children are readers and writers in and of their worlds (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019; Lindfors, 2008; Souto-Manning & Yoon, 2018). They recognize the important people in their lives, they communicate their need for nourishment, and they read symbols within their homes and communities. They read their environments as texts. After all, reading goes well beyond decoding printed words.

As literate beings, young children learn to communicate—to read the world and write themselves in it—because it serves an important function (Bentley & Souto-Manning, 2019; Halliday, 1993). As such, they use gestures as actionable requests. They pick up toy telephones and pretend to talk to family members. Whether with store-bought or child-made costumes, they dress up as superheroes, firefighters, unicorns, and astronauts. Through their bodies (and embodiments), they write themselves in the world. They show us how writing is much more than marks on a page or symbols on a screen.

Although seldom regarded as such, young children arrive in our elementary school classrooms as capable literate beings. That is, they make meaning and make sense with and of symbols before ever setting foot in our classrooms. This premise undergirds our responsibilities as teachers—to uphold and defend students' rights to read and write in the elementary grades.

Young children's rights to read and write must be defended. As young children enter elementary school classrooms, teachers, employing mandated benchmark assessments, often feel pressured to disregard their sophisticated literacy practices in favor of a restrictive set of skills, which narrows what counts as literacy. From such a perspective, literacy becomes defined as simply decoding words and writing symbols (letters), which strung together make up words. But—you may be wondering—isn't this the way literacy has always been defined? No! And even if literacy *had* been defined in this way, such a reductionist definition of literacy fails to account for the literacies young children have developed throughout their earliest years—from infancy on. Let me explain.



Young children's rights to read and write.

Where Do Restrictive Notions of Literacy Come From?

Restrictive notions of literacy can be traced to dominant ideologies that “narrowly define literacy and value school-based literacy as the only authentic type” (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996, p. 164). Such ideologies construct school-based literacy “as a neutral baseline, while masking the maintenance of white privilege and domination” (Harris, 1993, p. 1715) in education writ large and literacy in particular. They are visible in policies emanating from crises produced to protect systems of exclusion and racial subjugation.

For example, the well-known report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), issued more than thirty years ago by the Reagan administration, declared education in the United States to be a failure. Its first sentence declared: “Our nation is at risk.” This alarmist report went on to state, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.” Although short (thirty-six pages long), this report led to a narrowing of curriculum and a slew of testing policies to foster segregation and inequity (Kendi, 2016a, 2016b; Knoester & Au, 2017) under the stated purpose of proving that US education was not a failure. Specifically pertaining to reading, it offered a number of “indicators of risk,” including the following:

- Some 23 million American adults are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension.
- About 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent. (NCEE, 1983)

Relatedly, in the mid-1990s, under the guise of the seemingly neutral concepts of rigor and achievement (Kendi, 2016a, 2016b; Riley, 2017), the rhetoric of educational failure continued to narrow what was conceptualized and valued as reading. This happened as the Reading Excellence Act (H.R. 2614) was being signed into law in 1998 and two key reports were commissioned by expert panels authorized by the US Congress: (1) *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) and (2) *Teaching Children to Read: A Report of the National Reading Panel* (National Reading Panel, 2000). Recommendations from these documents directly informed the No Child Left Behind legislation and the funding attached to its implementation (National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d.).

These examples shed light onto a long history marked by denying students of color the rights to read and write. Dominant definitions of reading and of writing, as well as the materials and structures we chiefly employ to teach reading and writing, have invariably been influenced by these developments. That is, the definition

of literacy we currently employ in US elementary schools, the materials we have, and the measures we use are predominantly informed by narrow conceptualizations of literacy. As such, they are likely to suppress our students' rights to read and write—and they are unlikely to mirror our students' experiences and practices.

The Construction of Risk through Narrow Definitions of Literacy

In addition to narrowing what counts as literacy, these policies and reports (exemplified above) constructed children and youth of color as risks. They sanctioned racial, cultural, and linguistic inequities as acceptable—or, at the very least, as a logical outcome of their supposedly poor upbringing (Harris, 1993). One example of how they created a deficit narrative about children and youth of color can be seen in one of the bulleted points excerpted from *A Nation at Risk* (see p. 5). In labeling up to 40 percent of 17-year-olds of color as functionally illiterate, as opposed to 13 percent of the general population, without an explanation of the structural constraints and societal inequities framing such a “gap,” the report constructed youth of color as risks. The pathological findings dispensed by these reports issued by “expert” commissions indicated that the United States was behind other nations in terms of educational achievement. Children in US schools—and their teachers—were constructed as needing help discerning which materials and programs would best address the risks identified. In other words, the narrative authored by these reports implied that, left to their own devices, teachers would continue to fail their students—and the United States would likely fall further behind.

Solutions were quickly offered to address the “crisis,” which had been constructed by these (and other) reports that then informed education policy. These solutions were not devised by teachers, as members of the profession, but by outsiders who stood to profit from such a manufactured crisis—namely, publishers, curriculum developers, and test makers. Tools were soon provided under the guise that they would save US schools and boost US literacy achievement.

In uncritically responding to the recommendations issued and practices identified by these reports, commercial publishers flooded the market with reading and writing materials that did not reflect the backgrounds and experiences of many students. Thus, such reports effectively censored certain materials from classrooms and took choice away from students and teachers alike. These assessments and curriculum guides, marketed under the guise of bettering US education, served to dismember literacy—pulling away parts and decontextualizing them, as is the case of many phonics programs that do not include actual books—and to disempower children's ways of knowing. In fact,

policy related to language and literacy insist[s] that children and teachers in schools and centers live with a disconnect, with this educational paradox: There is a profusion of human diversity in our schools and an astonishingly narrow offering of curricula. (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 10)

This became particularly true for children from minoritized¹ backgrounds who, albeit not constituting the current numeric minority, are often treated in ways that marginalize their voices, values, experiences, and knowledges.

These narrow definitions of literacy, informed by high-stakes testing and increased administrative control of curricula, recycle “the view of children as empty vessels to be filled by behaviorist-oriented, scripted lessons” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 10). They prioritize what young children cannot do, instead of valuing, leveraging, and cultivating what they can do. This restrictive approach to literacy development has been problematically predicated on four interrelated understandings, rooted in racist ideas and entangled forms of bigotry (Kendi, 2016a; 2016b):

1. That some families provide their young children with “rich language and literacy” while others do not;
2. That children from families who provide “rich literacy and language” do better in school than those from “language poor families”;
3. That “exposure to less common, more sophisticated vocabulary (i.e., rare words) at home relates directly to children’s vocabulary acquisition”; and
4. That the “better” a child’s vocabulary, the better reader they will be—and this depends on how their families use “sophisticated” and “rare” words in everyday conversations (Strickland, 2004, p. 87).

While there are varying perspectives on the link between vocabulary and reading as it pertains to early literacy development (e.g., Cunningham & Carroll, 2015; Davis, 2003; Gee, 1999; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014; Souto-Manning & Yoon, 2018; Wasik, Hindman, & Snell, 2016; Willis, 2015), I trouble the understanding that some families are “language poor” while others are “language rich” and that some families use “sophisticated vocabulary” (deemed to be better or superior) while others do not. This is especially problematic because the families who are deemed to have “language rich” practices and employ “sophisticated vocabulary” are predominantly white,² economically comfortable, dominant-American-English³-speaking (these descriptors often go unlabeled in research studies), and those who are deemed to be “language poor” are disproportionately families of color (Davis, 2003; Gee, 1999; Souto-Manning & Yoon, 2018; Willis, 2015). Further, by proposing that it is up to families to change their language and literacy practices to align with those (over)valued in schools, educators embrace assimilationist stances and disproportionately place the blame for minoritized children’s schooling failure, or at least

their early literacy development, on their families' communicative practices and linguistic repertoires. And by teaching children that "sophisticated vocabulary" is superior to their families' and communities' "ways with words" (Heath, 1983), we teachers (perhaps inadvertently) communicate the perceived inadequacy of, or their lack of regard for, minoritized children's families and for their very communicative practices.

To be sure, the concept of "language-poor families" furthers an ideology of pathology—the view that it is the children and not the teaching that needs to be remediated—problematically locating the issue of children's low achievement and lagging literacy skills within the family and not within the context of classrooms and schools, even as these tend to uphold dominant ways of being and behaving as norms (Goodwin, Cheruvu, & Genishi, 2008). In contrast, expansive and inclusive notions of literacy—those that uphold our students' rights to read and write (National Council of Teachers of English, 2018; NCTE, 2014)—go much beyond such narrow conceptualizations of literacy. Fundamentally, equitable and inclusive notions of literacy require us teachers to reject the "word gap" rhetoric, a rhetoric that has been troubled by many researchers over the past decade (e.g., Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; Michaels, 2013). Instead, it requires us to identify, leverage, and sustain the sophisticated communicative practices and linguistic repertoires of traditionally minoritized families and communities, centering them in and through our teaching.

Equitable and inclusive notions of literacy, which are foundational to upholding our students' rights to read and write and to the pursuit of justice, require us to understand that there isn't a "gap," as purported by *A Nation at Risk* thirty-five years ago. Instead, they require us to understand that there is "a language debt owed to minoritized individuals and communities" (Souto-Manning & Yoon, 2018, p. 162), thus inviting us to revise our assumptions about accountability and answerability. Instead of holding minoritized students and their families responsible for bridging the academic gap, which is conceptualized as a problem of the individual, they urge us to position society as answerable for the language debt that has escalated cross-generationally, as African languages were stripped from enslaved Africans (Smitherman, 1998), Mexican American children were degraded in schools (Alemán & Luna, 2013), Indigenous languages were forcibly replaced by English (National Museum of the American Indian, 2007), and Asian American children were failed by schooling for not knowing English (e.g., *Lau v. Nichols*). Further, an equitable and inclusive understanding of literacy asks to consider the literacy debt, which acknowledges that enslaved Africans were denied the right to learn how to read and write by a number of "anti-literacy statutes of education restrictions" passed in twelve states by 1835 (Watson, 2009, p. W69), that the powerful oral

literacies of First Nations were devalued in favor of overvaluing the written word embodied by the forces of settler colonialism (Grande, 2004), and that dominant American English was positioned as superior to languages such as Spanish and Chinese by schools and schooling, impacting the language rights of minoritized children and communities (Alemán & Luna, 2013; Wiley, 2007). Throughout American history, “rights and privileges have been distributed selectively based on the recognition of legal status” (Wiley, 2007, p. 89). Thus, chattel slavery, settler colonialism, and other forms of exclusion (challenged by legal cases at state and federal levels, such as *Hernandez v. Driscoll CISD* and *Lau v. Nichols*) effectively deny minoritized communities’ rights to reading, to writing, and to their language practices.

As Delpit (1988) explained more than thirty years ago, in the United States, “Children from middle-class homes tend to do better in school than those from non-middle-class homes because the culture of the school is based on the culture of the upper and middle classes—of those in power” (p. 283). These inequities are exacerbated by societal investments (including, but not limited to, financial investments). That is, there is greater financing of curricula and materials representing dominant language and literacy practices in US society, which translates into more value being attributed to them (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016; Souto-Manning et al., 2018).

While there is a misalignment between the practices of minoritized children, families, and communities and what is (over)valued in US schools, thus creating the false notion of failure for and by minoritized children (many of whom are children of color who speak languages other than dominant American English), it is simply inadequate to blame children and families for such misalignment or to judge their literacies and language repertoires unfavorably as a result. Such a judgment continues to perpetuate inequity in schooling and in society and compromises children’s rights to read, to write, and to engage in their ways of communicating and utilize their full linguistic repertoires in our classrooms and schools (CCCC, 1974; NCTE, 2018, 2014).

Important Concepts

Chattel slavery is “the most common form of slavery known to Americans. This system, which allowed people—considered legal property—to be bought, sold and owned forever, was supported by the US and European powers in the 16th–18th centuries” (National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, 2020). Here’s a resource for teaching about chattel slavery: <https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/TT-Teaching-Hard-History-American-Slavery-Report-WEB-February-2018.pdf>.

Settler colonialism is “the removal and erasure of Indigenous peoples in order to take the land for use by settlers in perpetuity. . . . This means that settler-colonialism is not just a vicious thing of the past, such as the gold rush, but exists as long as settlers are living on appropriated land and thus exists today” (Morris, 2019). Elementary school students must “understand that the United States couldn’t exist without its settler-colonial foundation” (Morris, 2019) and acknowledge how many of us live on stolen lands. Here’s a resource for teaching about settler colonialism: <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/what-is-settlercolonialism>.

Important Cases

Hernandez v. Driscoll CISD (1948–1957) was a legal case that “represented the final attempt of the Texas school system to cling to its ‘language’ rationale in order to maintain legal segregation of Mexican Americans” (Allsup, 1982, p. 94, cited in Alemán, 2004, p. 6). It sought to interrupt the common practice of Mexican American children being grouped separately (and held back) to learn English in their public schools, even when English was their only language. This case illustrates the punishing reach of policies against speaking languages other than English. Mexican American children were degraded for speaking Spanish. In fact,

Mexican American students were relegated to a “beginner,” “low,” and then “high” first grade—a practice that was not uncommon across the Southwest. School officials argued in the case that this practice was necessary because the “retardation of Latin children” would adversely impact the education of White children. (Video Project, 2020)

Such ideologies led Mexican American families to eliminate Spanish and languages other than English from their communicative repertoires as a way of protecting their children from harm. The documentary *Stolen Education* (Alemán & Luna, 2013) provides an understanding of this case. It can be accessed here: <https://www.videoproject.com/Stolen-Education.html>.

Lau v. Nichols (1974) was a class action lawsuit seeking to ensure the language rights of Chinese students in San Francisco United School District, a US Supreme Court case in which the Court unanimously decided that:

The failure of the San Francisco school system to provide English language instruction to approximately 1,800 students of Chinese ancestry who do not speak English, or to provide them with other adequate instructional procedures, denies them a meaningful opportunity to participate in the public educational program and thus violates § 601 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which bans discrimination based “on the ground of race, color, or national origin,” in “any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance,” and the implementing regulations of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

This decision resulted in the Lau Remedies, which were applied to all school districts in the United States, ensuring the availability of bilingual programs, including subject matter instruction in students’ home languages. Teachers can learn more about *Lau v. Nichols* by reading the ruling in the case (<http://cdn.loc.gov/service/ll/usrep/usrep414/usrep414563/usrep414563.pdf>) and by watching the series *Celebrate Heritage, Celebrate Unity* on YouTube, a three-part series on the history of bilingual education in the San Francisco United School District (Bartlebaugh, 2007). Students may also enjoy this YouTube video made with Powtoon: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7eUeXqGDGO>.

It is important to understand that assessing language and literacy development “against dominant practices, as with studies such as the one conducted by Hart and Risley (2003)—blaming individual children, their families, and their communities for a perceived word gap”—is problematic at best (Souto-Manning & Yoon, 2018, p. 191). At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge that the pressures associated with—and offered as a solution to—the US “crisis” in education in general and in literacy in particular are very real.

We teachers are often told that children from minoritized backgrounds enter our classrooms “with no language” and that they need more vocabulary, since their family is “language poor.” Without understanding the problem inherent with labels such as “language poor,” it is easy—even with the best intentions—to engage in literacy practices that fail to uphold students’ rights to read and write (NCTE, 2018; NCTE, 2014) and, as a result, deny students’ very humanity. To suspend this harm, fully honor the humanity of the children we teach, and mobilize literacy teaching in the pursuit of justice, “[n]arrow visions need to be replaced with the complex scenes that are spacious enough for children’s diverse ways of being. . . . That more welcoming terrain has space for the strengths and resources of children” of color (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 10).

Thus, to defend and uphold students’ rights, we must consider the language debt owed to minoritized communities. As with the “education debt” (defined by Ladson-Billings, 2006), the language debt is:

- historical—US schooling imposed assimilation, erasure, and subjugation onto people of color via communicative practices that upheld the interests of whiteness, including the overprivileging of dominant American English;
- economic—throughout history, seeking to uphold the dominance of whiteness, policymakers resourced schools marked by dominant language practices and characterized by whiteness in terms of ways of knowing, communicating, being, and behaving;
- sociopolitical—decisions that ensure the civic process is predominantly or exclusively written in dominant American English also ensure white dominance; and
- moral—in “counting the words a child speaks, the field distorts the bigger issue: how dominant languages continue to privilege dominant groups and individuals, as well as how language has served to discriminate, segregate, disempower, and dehumanize” (Souto-Manning & Yoon, 2018, p. 194).

Students’ Rights to Read and Write

In light of the language debt and of restrictive notions of literacy resulting from the standardization of curriculum and teaching, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), a US-based professional organization dedicated to improving



Dreaming about expansive notions of what counts as literacy.

the teaching of literacy and language at all levels, issued two important statements. These statements—*The Students' Right to Read* (2018) and *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write* (2014)—help us teachers defend our students' literacies, cultivate their ability to make choices, and uphold their rights to read books that represent who they are and to write in ways that make sense to them, often multimodally, challenging restrictive notions of literacy. These statements open up the definition of literacy, reclaiming student and teacher agency. They call for “students’ free access to all texts” (NCTE, 2018, p. vii). (All page references to these position statements map to the texts reprinted in the front matter of this book.) As such, they serve as powerful forces, and also as rationales for teachers seeking to empower their students—and themselves—in a pressure-filled time when restrictive literacy curricula (e.g., E. D. Hirsch’s Core Knowledge) and teaching practices (what some call “teaching moves”—e.g., Lemov, 2010) are widely adopted, often defining teaching as merely a technical enterprise.

The Students' Right to Read (NCTE, 2018) underscores the importance of freedom. In doing so, it acknowledges the ingrained problematics of determining which books may or may not be appropriate for students and rejects the use

of prescribed materials or reading levels as tools for censoring. When teachers are “forced through the pressures of censorship to use only safe or antiseptic works,” we “are placed in the morally and intellectually untenable position of lying to [our] students about the nature and condition of humanity” (NCTE, 2018, p. xi), sanctioning dominant societal values as normal or acceptable, and communicating that the views, values, practices, and experiences of minoritized communities (e.g., LGBTQ+ speakers of African American Language) are unusual or marginal. Book censorship is a simple way to marginalize children, families, and communities.

“Since the 1800s, attitudes about which books are ‘appropriate’ for kids to read have too often suppressed stories” portraying the historical legacies, cultural practices, language repertoires, and lived experiences of minoritized persons, families, and communities (Ringel, 2016, para. 1). We see this with books such as *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, the story of two male penguins in the Central Park Zoo who become a family, and *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas, which addresses police brutality through the eyes of a Black teenager, Starr, both of which are banned in many US schools and school districts. So censoring books is a harmful practice that compromises our students’ right to read—and may ultimately deny their very humanity.

Recognizing how censorship has historically silenced the voices of communities that have been and continue to be minoritized, NCTE has denounced censorship as often arbitrary and irrational. Further, in defending students’ right to read, it recognizes that any work can be deemed inappropriate or unsafe for and by someone in society. *The Students’ Right to Read* thus offers guidance for teachers who experience censorship of books and other reading materials (magazines, sites, newspapers, etc.). It explains:

Literature about minoritized ethnic or racial groups remains “controversial” or “objectionable” to many adults. As long as groups such as African Americans, Pacific Islanders, American Indians, Asian Americans, and Latinxs “kept their proper place” —awarded them by a White society—censors rarely raised their voices. But attacks have increased in frequency as minoritized groups have refused to observe their assigned “place.” Though nominally, the criticisms of literature about minoritized racial or ethnic groups have usually been directed at “bad language,” “suggestive situations,” “questionable literary merit,” or “ungrammatical English” (usually oblique complaints about the different dialect or culture of a group), the underlying motive for some attacks has unquestionably been discriminatory. (2018, p. viii)

The statement denounces commonly employed comments such as “offensive language, sexually explicit, unsuited to age group” (employed in response to Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*), “inaccurate, homosexuality, sex education, religious viewpoint, and unsuited for age group” (referring to Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jen-

nings's *I Am Jazz!*), and “anti-family, homosexuality, religious viewpoint, unsuited to age group” (referring to Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell's *And Tango Makes Three*).

Although it would be easy to dismiss censorship concerns as long-ago-and-far-away, they are alive and well today. For example, in today's society we witness the police department of Charleston, South Carolina, calling for the censorship of two books, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017) and *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely (2015), both by and about Black people, because they purportedly promote “distrust of police” (Leah, 2018). As if acts of racism and police brutality hadn't been committed persistently throughout the country, resulting in the murder of too many Black lives. This call for censorship is a direct affront to the NCTE statement *The Students' Right to Read*, which states that “teachers must be free to employ books, classic or contemporary, which do not hide, or lie to the young, about the perilous but wondrous times we live in, books which talk of the fears, hopes, joys, and frustrations people experience, books about people not only as they are but as they can be” (2018, p. xi).

Far too often, censored books represent minoritized populations. For example, one of the most banned children's books of all time is *And Tango Makes Three* (2005), based on a true story of two male penguins at the Central Park Zoo who adopted an egg and hatched a baby chick, Tango, thereby forming a family. The censorship of *And Tango Makes Three* has been justified on religious grounds. This is problematic, as it disavows Rudine Sims Bishop's notion that books (and bookshelves) need to serve as windows, mirrors, *and* sliding glass doors. She explained:

We need diverse books because we need books in which children can find themselves, see reflections of themselves. . . . Children need to see themselves reflected, but books can also be windows, so you can look through and see other worlds and see how they match up or don't match up to your own, but the sliding glass door allows you to enter that world as well, and so that's the reason why the diversity needs to go both ways. It's not just children who have been underrepresented and marginalized, but it's also the children who always find their mirrors in the books and, therefore, get an exaggerated sense of their own self-worth and a false sense of what the world is like. (Reading Rockets, 2015)

This is all the more necessary when children's books overwhelmingly portray white characters and are overwhelmingly written by white authors (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2019). And, as NCTE affirms, literature “should reflect the cultural contributions of minoritized groups in the United States, just as they should acquaint students with diverse contributions by the many peoples of the world” (2018). Although this is easier said than done given publishing trends.

The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison detailed how in 2015, only 14.3 percent of children's books

published in the United States were about American Indians, Latinxs, Asians and Asian Americans, and Africans and African Americans combined. In 2017 this percentage rose to 24.8 percent. While the percentage of books about people of color is rising, it still represents less than half of the actual population of schoolchildren of color, which has been more than 50 percent in the United States since 2014. And children's books published in the United States written by authors of color constituted 10.2 percent in 2015 and 14.2 percent in 2017. In light of the percentage of children of color in today's classroom (more than 50 percent nationwide), this amounts to a huge racial disproportionality.

Magazines, newspapers, and websites have, like books, come under attack, due to nudity, poorly reported news, and other reasons. Yet, as the NCTE statement on reading explicates, "One of the foundations of a democratic society is the individual's right to read, and also the individual's right to freely choose what they would like to read. This right is based on an assumption that the educated possess judgment and understanding and can be trusted with the determination of their own actions" (p. x). The statement also links the right to read to freedom:

The right to read, like all rights guaranteed or implied within our constitutional tradition, can be used wisely or foolishly. In many ways, education is an effort to improve the quality of choices open to all students. But to deny the freedom of choice in fear that it may be unwisely used is to destroy the freedom itself. For this reason, we respect the right of individuals to be selective in their own reading. But for the same reason, we oppose efforts of individuals or groups to limit the freedom of choice of others or to impose their own standards or tastes upon the community at large. (2018, p. x)

In addition to *The Students' Right to Read*, NCTE issued a document titled *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write* (2014), which clarifies its conviction that students have the "fundamental right" to express "ideas without fear of censorship" (p. xix). This includes, but is not limited to, expressing their ideas in ways that are different from the practices typically (over)valued in their classrooms and schools (e.g., written stories and essays in dominant American English). Going much beyond writing in the traditional sense, the statement seeks to protect students' right to author in and across multiple named languages. To uphold students' rights, the statement specifically rejects reductive notions of literacy, affirming: "Teachers should avoid scripted writing that discourages individual creativity, voice, or expression of ideas" (p. xix). Instead, teachers need to offer students many opportunities, materials, and modes for authoring "for a variety of purposes and audiences," employing an array of communicative practices and linguistic repertoires.

In alignment with the CCCC/NCTE *Students' Right to Their Own Language* statement (adopted in 1972 and published in a special issue of *College Composi-*

tion and Communication in 1974), *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write* (2014) affirms students' right to "their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialect of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style" (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1974). Thus, upholding students' right to write requires rejecting "the myth of a standard American dialect" (CCCC, 1974), questioning its very validity, and acknowledging that the language of power is the language of "those who have power" (Delpit, 1988, p. 282). It requires work on our part as teachers, interrupting and unlearning prevalent myths in schooling and society.

For example, despite the "myth of a standard American dialect" (CCCC, 1974) or of a standard language (what some refer to as "standard English"), speakers of languages other than dominant American English continue to be seen and positioned in many settings as less capable than speakers of dominant American English. Fifth-grade teacher Alice Lee recalls thinking of African American Language (AAL) as "slang," and asking, "Aren't we doing a disservice by allowing [students] . . . to talk like that in the classroom, when they are expected to speak in standard English in the real world?" (2017, p. 27). This ingrained and pervasive myth prevails today. Challenging such myths leads to learning (about African American language *as* a language, for example) and to understanding that "correcting" African American language speakers is counterproductive" (p. 27), harmful, and damaging; it compromises students' right to write—and their very humanity. As teachers we must commit to engaging our "students fully in a writing process that allows them the necessary freedom to formulate and evaluate ideas, develop voice, experiment with syntax and language, express creativity, elaborate on viewpoints, and refine arguments" (NCTE, 2014, p. xix), and this includes the use of communicative practices and linguistic repertoires with which we ourselves may not be familiar or that may push back against what is regarded as "academic language." After all, words are powerful and freedom matters.

Regarding words as a "powerful tool of expression, a means to clarify, explore, inquire, and learn as well as a way to record present moments for the benefit of future generations," the *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write* (2014, p. xix) requires us teachers to work with our students in ways that honor their ways with words, the power of their words, instead of engaging in teaching that promotes processes of assimilation and linguistic erasure. It urges us to sustain students' voices and stories, to honor their rich legacies and sophisticated communicative practices—even if and when they are not part of the "official" literacy curriculum—asking us to "avoid indoctrination" and to "be respectful of both the writer and his/her ideas, even those with which the teacher disagrees" or is unfamiliar. This requires us to be

committed to envisioning and enacting pedagogies that are not filtered through a lens of contempt and pity (e.g., the “achievement gap”) but, rather, are centered on contending in complex ways with the rich and innovative linguistic, literate, and cultural practices of . . . communities of color. (Paris and Alim, 2014, p. 86)

Defending and upholding our students' right to write is predicated on supporting our students' diverse and rich cultural practices and sophisticated—albeit often silenced—communicative repertoires. This should be apparent in our mindset as well as visible in our teaching practice (Souto-Manning et al., 2018).

But the NCTE statement not only identifies teachers' responsibilities in upholding students' right to write (and author, broadly conceived), but it also identifies the responsibilities of administrators and school districts, stating that they “should work in collaboration with students who write for school publications . . . and, within the limits of state law or district/school policies, should avoid prior review” (2014, p. xx). This can be a difficult stance—yet it is one that cannot be compromised, even within an ever-growing climate of hyper-surveillance. Although censorship within the context of elementary schools does not often make it into the news, in the very school where some of the teachers who are contributors to this book teach or have taught, PS 75 in New York City, a visual literacy project authored by students in a kindergarten came under attack after it was critiqued by conservative commentator Sean Hannity and resulted in “a deluge of threatening phone calls, profanity-laden emails and violent social media posts after conservative bloggers published an article calling a student-made fundraising project an example of left-wing indoctrination” (McKay, 2016). Although the administrator's response was critiqued in vicious and problematic ways, it *was* the administrator's responsibility to uphold students' right to author, even from the earliest elementary school years. Doing so reaffirms students' capabilities and protects their rights—as learners, as writers, and as individuals.

The statements issued by NCTE not only seek to protect students' rights to read and write, but also serve as much-needed reminders that these are *rights*, not privileges to be dispensed as rewards or in ways that foster disproportionality. This is a point I take up in the conclusion of this book (Chapter 9) as I frame the rights to read and write as human rights. After all, antiliteracy movements and laws have been in place historically to dispossess, disempower, and dehumanize individuals and communities of color (e.g., Davis, 1981; Walker, 2009; Fisher, 2009).

But before we situate these rights within a history of antiliteracy laws, we turn to how they come to life within the context of today's elementary classrooms. Drawing on the NCTE position statements *The Students' Right to Read* and *NCTE Beliefs about Students' Right to Write*, Part II of this book unveils the ways in which eight New York City public school teachers engaged with the principles identi-

fied in these statements through their everyday practice. To do so, they critically problematized and interrupted approaches to reading, writing, and talk that do not prioritize students' rights, teaching in ways that honored the full humanity of their students, in the pursuit of justice.

Prioritizing Students' Rights to Read and Write in the Classroom

In the chapters that constitute Part II: In The Classroom, eight elementary public school teachers link their classroom practices to concepts described in these NCTE position statements, thereby defining students' rights in elementary school classrooms as they pertain to reading, writing, and talk. Part II consists of six vignettes written in first-person voice by elementary school teachers who have engaged in teaching and/or designed learning experiences that foster students' rights to read and to write in their own languages in their classrooms. All of these teachers currently work in New York City public schools. They teach grades 1 through 5 and work with students representing diverse demographics. They themselves are diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, income, gender identity, language practices, and sexuality. They share an assets view of the communities their students come from, a clear belief in the brilliance of the children they teach, a commitment to fostering critical multicultural competence (positioning themselves and their students as change agents), and literacy teaching practices that seek to problematize injustices and foster critical consciousness (Gorski, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016; Souto-Manning et al., 2018).

Here, I briefly introduce the focus of each of their vignettes:

- In “Students’ Right to Representation in the Early Childhood Curriculum,” second-grade teacher Carmen Lugo Llerena denounces how while stories matter, they are disproportionately Eurocentric and thus do not represent the majority of students in today’s US classrooms. Through classroom examples, Carmen shares how she presents students with counternarratives to the prescribed curricular text.
- In “Students’ Right to Author Their Identities,” fourth-grade teacher Alison Lanza offers windows into her hip-hop-education-informed practices in second and fourth grades (Emdin, 2016). Firm in her belief that students have the right to learn about who they are, Alison shares how she uses hip-hop as a framework to design learning experiences that help her students interrupt and dismantle injustice.
- In “Students’ Rights to Their Names, Languages, and Cultures,” fourth-grade dual language special education teacher Benelly Álvarez explains how—despite time pressures and curricular mandates—she committed to reading books by and about Latinx individuals and communities (reflective of her student population). She then explores visual autobiographies as sites for her

students to acknowledge and reflect on their identities and identify their rich cultural and historical legacies.

- In “Learning is mostly about English’: Students’ Right to Trouble the Language of Power,” teachers Emma Pelosi and Patty Pión discuss how they interrupted students’ perceptions of language hierarchies within the context of a second-grade dual language classroom. Exploring immigration, chattel slavery, discrimination, and patriotism through open-ended questions and student-led inquiries, they fostered student choice and cultivated agency and voice.
- In “Students’ Rights to Read and Write about Homophobia and Hate Crimes,” fourth/fifth-grade coteachers Jessica Martell and Billy Fong discuss how they engaged the class with the 2016 mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida. They share their concerns and discomfort approaching this topic and explain how they resolved those issues and designed activities that fostered students’ reading and writing development and allowed them to explore social injustice.
- In “Students’ Right to Trauma-Informed Literacy Teaching,” first-grade teacher Karina Malik explains how she strives to cultivate a trauma-informed classroom. She specifically shares how she begins the year by creating an environment of trust and transparency and then builds a supportive environment that empowers students’ voices and stories—orally and in writing.

Grounded in firm commitments to racial justice, linguistic pluralism, and cultural diversity, the chapters that make up Part II of this book focus on what grades 1–5 teachers have done to defend their students’ rights to read and write—as well as their right to representation in and through reading and writing. As you will see, such representation takes many forms: their identities, their experiences, their languaging practices. As you turn the page and enter diverse New York City public school classrooms, I hope that you will be inspired to reimagine or to extend your own practice, reinventing the commitments and ideas presented in ways that are significant to your own context.

Notes

1. I use the term *minoritized* because the commonly used term *minority* is often numerically inaccurate within a context where children and youth of color constitute the numeric majority in US public schools. Further, the term *minoritized* accounts for the way in which children of color, their families, and communities are often treated as the minority, even when they are not. I borrow this term from Teresa McCarty (2002).

2. Throughout the book, when *Black* and *Brown* are used as descriptions of race, they are capitalized. When *white* is used to describe race, it is not. This seeming inconsistency is deliberate and takes a stand against the long history of white supremacy in the United States.

3. What some may call “standard English.”

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Students' Rights to Read and Write

**[Adapted from NCTE's *The Students' Right to Read* (Rev. 2018) and
NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write (2014)]**

Foundational to a democratic society is the individual's right to read, as well as the individual's right to freely choose what they would like to read. The English classroom, then, becomes a vital site for putting this belief in practice.

Thus, teachers should thoughtfully consider a number of factors:

- The contribution each work may make to the education of the reader, its aesthetic value, its honesty, its readability, and its appeal
- The different purposes for using different texts—for example, the criteria for choosing a text for an entire class, small groups, or individuals
- The connections that can be made between books and individual students—for example, encouraging the students themselves to explore and engage with texts of their own selection
- The ways books can reflect the cultural contributions of minoritized groups in the United States, as well as diverse contributions by the many peoples of the world
- How to prepare to support and defend their classroom and students' process in selecting and engaging with diverse texts against potential censorship and controversy

During this era of high-stakes testing, technology-based instruction, and increased control over students' expression due to school violence, students' right to write must be protected.

Among NCTE's beliefs:

- The expression of ideas without fear of censorship is a fundamental right.
 - Words are a powerful tool of expression.
 - Students need many opportunities to write for a variety of purposes and audiences in all classes.
 - Teacher feedback should avoid indoctrination because of personal beliefs and should be respectful of both the writer and his or her ideas.
 - English language arts teachers are qualified to frame and assign student writing tasks, but students should have choice and control.
 - Teachers should avoid scripted writing that discourages individual creativity, voice, or expression of ideas.
 - Teachers should engage students fully in a writing process that allows them the necessary freedom to formulate and evaluate ideas, develop voice, experiment with syntax and language, express creativity, elaborate on viewpoints, and refine arguments.
 - Teachers should foster in students an understanding of and appreciation for the responsibilities inherent in writing and publication.
 - Teachers should explicitly teach the distinction between violent writing and violence in writing.
-

Young children make meaning and make sense from the earliest years. They read facial expressions, engage in interactions, and read symbols across a variety of named languages. From the earliest grades, children have the right to read and write words and worlds. But historically narrow definitions of reading and writing communicate to children that they are not readers, that they are not writers. Classroom materials also often don't reflect the growing population of multilingual children of color, compromising their right to access texts that reflect their cultural values, language practices, and historical legacies.

Promoting equitable, inclusive, and plural understandings of literacy, Mariana Souto-Manning and eight New York City public school teachers explore how elementary teachers can welcome into their classrooms the voices, values, language practices, stories, and experiences of their students who have been minoritized by dominant curricula, cultivating reading and writing experiences that showcase children's varied skills and rich practices. An interview with award-winning author Jacqueline Woodson affirms the importance of student voice and choice in their literacy education.

Readers are invited to enter classrooms where teachers have engaged with the principles detailed in two NCTE position statements—*NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write* and *The Students' Right to Read*—in the pursuit of justice. Collectively, their experiences show that when teachers view the communities their students come from as assets to and in school, children not only thrive academically, but they also gain confidence in themselves as learners and develop a critical consciousness. Together, stepping into their power, they seek to right historical and contemporary wrongs as they commit to changing the world.

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