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EdD-Activism:

Two Journeys Converge to Support Long-Term English Learners

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ABSTRACT

The story of any activist educator has its own twists and turns, yet their goals of equity and social justice hold strong. This article will reflect on the vastly different journeys of a newly emerging EdD-activist teacher and a life-long activist administrator whose visions converge in a relatively large midwestern majority-minority school district, and a building where 49% of the students are Hispanic/Latino, 14% are Pacific Islander, and 33% are labeled English learners. The problem tackled here is two-fold: a culturally irrelevant boxed English language development curriculum that promises linguistic and academic success for long-term English learners, but only brings them success in assimilation, and a dearth of educators who look like these students that so desperately need voice and representation. Here, we illustrate how action research and intentional administrative efforts bring attention and possible solutions to these issues.

KEYWORDS

activism, action research, English learners

Activism in the field of Teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) is a relatively new phenomenon. Historically, imperialism used European languages as a tool to bring civilization to Indigenous people of the Americas (Hall, 2016). As a result, the history of critical pedagogy in TESOL is short (Coney, 2016; Kubota & Lin, 2006). The 2006 *TESOL Quarterly* special issue on race was a step toward breaking down the notion that English spoken by native speakers was superior. At present, deeply held beliefs and legislation across the country maintain English-only schools and ban critical approaches to teaching, doubling down on Eurocentric values of assimilation. As a majority-minority school district in Arkansas, we face growing numbers of long-term English learners (LTELs) who have successfully assimilated into the hegemonic culture yet failed to develop satisfactory language skills as determined by a state standardized language test. As Coney (2016) predicted, "The combination of the curricula chosen by a White establishment, female teachers of European descent, unchecked White privilege, and a diverse student population does not lend itself to informed teaching," (p. 16) nor to student success. Thus, creating a space for activism in public schools that recognizes its flaws in developing language and literacy.

The story of any activist educator has twists and turns, yet their goals of equity and social justice hold strong. Embracing the publication's theme of being, becoming, and supporting scholarly activism in education, this article tells the stories of an emerging EdD-activist TESOL teacher and a lifelong activist administrator. While our journeys are vastly different, our visions converge in a relatively large midwestern school district where 67% of the students are Hispanic/Latino and 20% are Pacific Islander. It is in this union of an activist duo that we address a twofold problem: (a) a culturally irrelevant, prescribed English language development (ELD) curriculum that promises English learners (ELs) linguistic and academic success but only accomplishes assimilation, and (b) a dearth of educators who look like our LTELs who so desperately need voice and representation. This narrative highlights our respective relationships with activism through their births, courtships, and finally, to a symbolic marriage, highlighting the downfalls of a system and our attempt to shift from a culture that creates a deficit narrative of our students to one that sees them as assets with immense potential.

BIRTH

Our stories overlap in time but exist in different worlds. The teacher's story begins in the suburbs of a major metropolitan northern city as the principal's story takes place in a southern inner-city. This section shares the origin stories of these two educators, illustrating the vast foundations from which activism can arise.

Budding Teacher in Northern Suburbia

My parents' story was a classic tale of courtship from both sides of the tracks. Mom grew up on the same side of St. Paul, Minnesota as the Governor's Mansion and other Victorian-era homes on historic Summit Avenue. While they did not live in one of these homes, Mom and her siblings attended private Catholic schools on prestigious Summit. No one knew much about her father's upbringing except that my great-grandfather was not a positive role model in my grandpa's life. Grandpa enlisted in the Marines at 17 to remove

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himself from a harmful situation and get his life on track. He returned from the war, married my grandmother, and took advantage of the military benefits he earned, establishing a prosperous life for his family. Until the day he died, Grandpa was willing and able to offer his children and grandchildren whatever financial support he could. Generations continue to benefit from his hard work, generosity, and White privilege.

Across the Mississippi River, my father's family lived a more humble, blue-collar life. In the 1950s and 60s, the West Side of St. Paul was where the city's Mexican population settled. Dad grew up playing football with peers of all racial and linguistic backgrounds, developing a genuine acceptance of and respect for diversity. Dad's family lived modestly, and after my paternal grandfather's death, Grandma was the matriarch, working hard to make sure her seven grandkids had gifts and full stomachs at Christmas. While my parents' childhood lifestyles were different, both were raised with a level of privilege whereby the need or even notion of activism never entered their lexicon.

An inherently gifted athlete, Dad earned a football scholarship to the University of Minnesota; however, the responsibility of being a highly competitive athlete and student was more than he wanted to carry. When he and Mom met, Dad was embarking on a hockey career, expected to play on the 1968 U.S. Olympic team only to be drafted to Vietnam the spring before the games. Though he resented how the military sidelined his athletic career, Dad was never one to engage in anti-war activism. When he returned, my parents married, and while Dad did not want his kids to be cloistered in White suburbia, he also refused to send us to private schools. The compromise was to buy a home in a first-tier suburb with quality public schools.

Growing up, our next-door neighbors in the suburbs were a young Black family, and while they did not live in the neighborhood for long, their little girl was one of my best childhood friends. Even with this friendship and strong connections to the West Side, my exposure to diversity was never more than adjacent. Like my parents, I had no drive to engage in activism. My high school graduating class had a smattering of Asian students, many of whom were adopted by White families, and only a couple of Black students. My dad had taught absolute acceptance of difference, but my White privilege and biases went unchecked for decades.

Despite no one in my family graduating from college, I knew I was headed for higher education. While I had no clue about my path, I knew there was something more for me than the life I had lived up to that point. My activism was born in a relationship with a professor who became my first real mentor in education. While Mom always wanted me to dress in pink and play with dolls, Dad taught me how to check my oil and change a flat tire. He nurtured my athletic abilities, making sure I played all the sports right along with the boys. I resisted the female standard and spoke out against societal gender inequities in a college environment that supported my dissent. I may have called myself a feminist, but my activism did not go beyond heated conversations with close friends. While Dad taught me to stand up for my beliefs, I had not yet established a steady relationship with activism.

While feminism was my introduction to having an activist's voice in college, the real life-changer came as an opportunity to study abroad during my senior year. My college offered what was called The Global Semester—a 5-month course that took a group of 20 students and one professor to nine different countries. I studied history in Egypt, economics in India, art in Hong Kong, and religious philosophy in Japan as the group stopped in Switzerland to visit the World Health Organization, Israel to tour settlement camps in Gaza and the West Bank, and Nepal to hike the foothills of the Himalayas. I found myself intrigued by the history of these places, and the diverse languages, cultures, and people grabbed my heart and never let go.

Budding Administrator in a Southern Inner City

I was literally born against all odds. When I came into the world, my twice-divorced parents had been married for almost 3 years. My mother had endured five miscarriages over the course of three marriages. My father was 29 years my mother's senior and a good friend of my maternal grandfather, Ulysses "Bill" Williams, serving as his pallbearer in 1969 when my mother was a young 21 years old. While my father had at least three children from previous relationships, my mother had yet to carry a child full term. Finally, after 37 hours of labor, I made my appearance at 2:59 pm on January 28, 1977. My mother called me her "miracle child." From the very beginning, I was fighting against previously insurmountable odds.

My father, a World War II veteran, was the first Black police officer in my hometown of Magnolia, Arkansas. He was a pioneer and a trailblazer. He fought in a war to protect rights, freedoms, and democracy that he, as a Black man, could not fully enjoy. In 1965, he joined the police force in the Deep South, where racial tension was always simmering at the surface. He told me stories of how he was initially forbidden to arrest White people, so he did not arrest Black people either. He was an activist.

My mother, the most straight-talking and direct person I have ever known, taught me the term *terminal education* when I was probably 5 years old. She then went to school to finish her bachelor's and master's degrees in social work before I graduated high school. She let me know that my education would be my passport to realizing whatever dreams I would have. She taught me about the plight of Black people, dating back to the transatlantic slave trade, through the civil rights movement of the mid-20th century. She made me aware that I was standing on the shoulders of ancestors who had literally died so I would have the opportunity to fully participate in the great social experiment that we call America. Because "for everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (*New King James Version Bible*, 2024, Luke 12:48), my mother never allowed me to lament what being Black in the United States meant. Instead, she challenged me to make the world better for others wherever I was, just as others had done for me. I know now that she was training me to be an activist from childhood.

My maternal grandmother, Oda Mae Williams Hendricks, née Rhynes, was in Year 30 of what would become a 39-year teaching career when I was born. She had been an activist for student equality her entire career. This stance was never more evident than when she navigated the tumult of transitioning from teaching in segregated schools from 1947–1971 to teaching in integrated schools from 1971–1986. Schools did not fully integrate in my hometown until the fall of 1971. She still talks about how she and her Black teaching peers were not allowed to discipline White students or send them to the Black assistant principal. Meanwhile, Black students were being mistreated and unfairly disciplined by White teachers and administrators daily.

In the summer of 1956, my grandmother had the opportunity to study at the renowned Tuskegee Institute, a private, historically Black land-grant school in Tuskegee, Alabama. The school is famous for, among many things, its first president, Booker T. Washington. It is also the site of the despicable Tuskegee syphilis experiment where poor Black men with syphilis were allowed to go untreated to study the effects of the debilitating disease. The Tuskegee Airmen, the famous World War II aviators, were trained at Tuskegee by the U.S. Army Air Corps. Tuskegee was where pioneering agricultural scientist and professor, George Washington Carver, worked from 1896 to his death in 1943.

While studying at Tuskegee, my grandmother heard a rousing speech by a young, charismatic pastor from nearby Montgomery, Alabama. He spoke about the Montgomery Bus Boycott that was gaining national attention. The boycott was sparked by the arrest of Mrs. Rosa Parks, a Black woman, who refused to give up her seat for a White man. He also talked about the brutal murder of 13-year-old Emmett Till in August 1955 in Money, Mississippi for whistling at a White woman. Till's killers were acquitted but admitted to killing the child in a paid interview for *Look* magazine a few months later. My grandmother was enraptured by the vigor that the young minister displayed in speaking about the rampant injustices that plagued Black people for decades. After the speech, a throng of students flocked to the young minister. My grandmother was only able to get close enough to call his name and extend her hand. She exclaimed, "Dr. King!" Upon hearing his name, he turned around and shook my grandmother's right hand. As a child, I would ask my grandmother to tell me the story over and over again, wanting her to confirm that it was her right hand that he shook. I would caress my grandmother's hand as if, in some way, I too were shaking the hand of the great Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Looking back, I am thankful for the activist education I received at home. In contrast, my schools neither taught nor even broached the topics of racism and inequality until I got to the ninth grade. By then, I realized I had more knowledge about relevant historical events than my teachers. I understood that the opportunities before me were not always afforded to my predecessors. Regardless of where my dreams would ultimately take me, my family birthed activism in me, ensuring I would follow in their activist footsteps.

COURTSHIP

From the birth of our activism, our stories led to long careers in education. This section shares reflections on our respective courtships with activism, and the part it played in our roles as teachers, a teacher trainer, and a principal of diverse populations.

TESOL Professional's Career

In the early 2000s, I embarked upon my career in TESOL, earning a master's degree and teaching high school ELs in New York City. My degree covered the expected pedagogical topics of language acquisition, technology integration, classroom management, and student-centered teaching. The program was considered forward-thinking at the time in its push for incorporating students' backgrounds and cultures to engage diverse populations in the English language classroom. We were encouraged to integrate into our lessons' literature by authors such as Piri Thomas, James McBride, and Sandra Cisneros as tools for engaging diverse students in reading.

From my perspective of privilege, in the esteemed position of native-speaking English teacher, I thought acknowledging diverse cultures in my lessons through literature, famous people, and holidays fulfilled my responsibility to be culturally relevant. In hindsight, it's not surprising that the topic of race addressed in my graduate coursework through work by Lisa Delpit (1995) and others left me unsettled. Delpit called for a balance between preserving students' home cultures and providing them access to the White culture of power, and I did not know how to reconcile these two notions. While I valued diversity, I was more comfortable valuing colorblindness, rationalizing the practice of highlighting similarities and ignoring differences. I believed any discussion of race just left people feeling uncomfortable, preferring to avoid the topic completely. I recall being irritated and even offended during a workshop where the facilitator referred to White Americans as European Americans. My gut response was, "You can't call me that. I'm simply American." At that same moment, however, I also realized the double standard I was guilty of holding. I lacked the tools to reflect on my racial bias and be critical of its role in my perceptions as a White teacher of non-White students. While the passion to advocate for my students was strong, I was still oblivious to the intersection of language, culture, and race or any need I had to understand it. While I did not know how to engage in the dance of checking my implicit bias, the desire to start a courtship became clear.

My career in TESOL evolved as I took opportunities to work with the U.S. State Department on diplomacy projects to build English language capacity in developing countries. Embracing the work of bringing the opportunities of English to remote corners of the world, I never thought English language teaching could be an act of "political and cultural power" (Luke & Dooley, 2009, p. 1). Overtly, my English classes in Kosovo for Serbian and Albanian teenagers brought these students access to English, developing valuable language skills. Covertly, my primary goal was to create opportunities for these students to reframe their learned hate for each other into recognizing common ground and developing an understanding that replaced hate. Because of the trauma inflicted on both sides by war, I was coached to avoid any talk of inequality or injustice endured. It was too painful and volatile. While my work reached marginalized communities, it was founded on linguistic imperialism in the name of cultural diplomacy. I felt like I was the keeper of knowledge intending to unite these students as I failed to assume a critical stance toward the linguistic hegemony I was perpetuating. I returned to the States to continue this diplomacy at the University of Arkansas (UofA), working on U.S. State Department grants training teachers of English as a foreign language (TEFL) from the same developing countries I had just left. Again, building English language capacity in more remote corners of the world was my noble goal, consistent with my belief in this lingua franca as a key to global unification. I remained oblivious to the imperialist nature of the work.

As my career trajectory continued, I started to feel the itch for change, so I returned to my teaching roots in public education as an eighth-grade English teacher at Mary Francis George Junior High School (GJHS), a majority-minority school in northwest Arkansas. The students differed from the high school ELs I taught in New York City. Rather than being new immigrants, most of these young teens were born in the United States and raised speaking their family's native language at home yet never gained literacy in that language. Out of simple curiosity, I took an opportunity to teach upper-level

ELD, a course intended to support LTELs. Because of their solid verbal and aural language skills, these students are often seen and treated as native speakers. Yet, they continue to have high dropout rates, low graduation rates, and low achievement on state and national tests (Olsen, 2014). Many of our LTELs in the eighth and ninth grades have English literacy skills that surpass their Spanish reading and writing skills. Yet, every year, their English falls short according to the annual English proficiency assessment. ELD was supposed to be a means of bumping them up to grade-level literacy; however, as we worked through the scripted curriculum, it became clear that the culturally irrelevant content was not engaging students, causing me to question its effectiveness.

At the same time, my relationship with activism strengthened with the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police officers in Minneapolis, the other half of my Twin Cities home. As I witnessed rage among the Black community, I could see their justification after continued disregard and abuse from those holding power. I saw clearer than ever the need to recognize my ignorance and fully embark on a journey of self-reflection and increasing awareness and mitigation of my implicit biases. I wanted to apply my new-found drive to my teaching. Having always wanted to earn a doctorate but never knowing exactly what I wanted to study, my next steps became clear. I could have selected any number of universities that were closer to home and less expensive but I chose the University of South Carolina's (USC) EdD program, which emphasized equity and critical pedagogy through action research, finally putting a ring on the finger of activism. Thus began my research into the equity of EL education and better understanding the system's ineffectiveness in reaching a large yet unserved LTEL population.

Principal's Career

Like many kids are prone to do, I took a path that diverged from the medical career my mother had planned for me. I was a coach for the first 14 years of my career in education. Beginning in 2000 in my hometown of Magnolia, Arkansas, I became the first full-time assistant women's basketball coach at Southern Arkansas University. As a coach, I became, for many of my players, the dominant voice in their lives. I had a responsibility to them that far surpassed teaching them the fundamentals of sports. When I left the University of Arkansas at Little Rock as an assistant coach in 2004, I went to the then Henderson Health and Sciences Magnet Middle School in Little Rock to teach science and social studies and coach football, basketball, and track under the principal, Mr. Marvin Burton. We served about 850 students in Grades 6–8 at our peak during my 4 years there: 82% were Black, and 100% were experiencing poverty. There, my career in activism started in earnest.

There is often community and school-wide distrust in the instructional capacity of urban schools. Students in different racial and social-class backgrounds are rewarded for classroom behaviors that correspond to personality traits allegedly rewarded in the different occupational strata—the working classes for docility and obedience, the managerial classes for initiative and personal assertiveness. This trend is called "the soft bigotry of low expectations," a phrase coined by Michael Gerson (Oettinger, 2023) that describes a patronizing and dangerous attitude, cloaked as kindness, which assumes certain people are capable of less because of their race or background (Yeatman, 2024). I regularly saw this deficit thinking at Henderson, and Mr. Burton detested it, training me to see and detest it as well. He refused to allow faculty and staff to lower expectations for students. He fought for our school to be safe, clean, and high achieving, traits that are rarely associated with schools with similar demographics.

Students of color and students from low-income backgrounds often lag behind their peers in student achievement metrics (Bradley, 2024). Gershenson and Papageorge (2022) found that teachers expect 58% of White high-school students to obtain a 4-year college degree or more but anticipate the same for only 37% of Black students. These numbers almost mirror the number of college graduates broken down by race. These authors also found that 49% of White students ultimately graduate from college, compared to only 29% of Black students. This disparity is even more alarming considering that students cannot or will not perform well when teachers view them from a deficit perspective (Flanigan, 2014). I saw and heard this perspective firsthand in professional development meetings and conversations about students with many colleagues. I heard them make statements that hinted at their disbelief in our students' ability to do more than what they were doing, and it infuriated me. I would always snap back that we prepare our students to compete in a world that will not lower the bar for them to hurdle it. I maintain this belief to this day.

During my first year at Henderson, Mr. Burton told me I had to be more than *just* a coach. While initially defensive, I soon understood what he meant. He forced me to see the *entire* field of education. He showed me that my impact, while strong with my athletes, was still limited in scope. To truly make the type of difference our students needed, I had to be at the table where the decisions were being made, and that table did not exist in a gym or on a football field. I had to become an administrator. In 2014, after much prayer and deliberation, while serving as the head boys' basketball coach at Blytheville High School in Arkansas, a school and district very demographically similar to my start at Henderson, I was hired to be the principal of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Academy at the Academies at Jonesboro High School (JHS).

There were a lot of opportunities for educational activism during my 7 years at JHS. Initially, our academy was the smallest and least diverse: over 80% of the 174 students were White in a school that was 60% Black and Hispanic. By the conclusion of the 2020–2021 school year, we had over 400 students, and almost 50% were students of color. We achieved National Model Academy Status in 2018, presenting at the 2018 National Career Academy Coalition Conference in Houston, Texas, and the 2020 and 2021 National Elementary & Secondary Act Conferences in Atlanta and Boston. Actively recruiting students of color and girls, both underserved groups in STEM fields, was our team's priority along with helping them earn internships, scholarships, and jobs after high school and college. True activism requires a team that believes the mission is worth the struggle. That is what we had in the STEM Academy from 2014–2021, and I am forever grateful for the collaboration.

When opportunity knocks, sometimes there is a tendency to ignore it. I was happy at JHS. We had just built a new home in 2018, and our youngest daughter was entering her senior year in the fall of 2021. Leaving was not on the radar. While reaching out to the Springdale superintendent, a classmate from my doctoral work years ago, to support a colleague looking for a job, this superintendent asked me if *I* was ready to come to Springdale. I laughed, but almost 3 months later, my family moved to northwest Arkansas, where I became the principal at George Junior High School (GJHS).

Because I was moving into a situation with an entirely different population of students on paper, I was equally excited and nervous. I *knew* what I represented to the thousands of Black students I worked with over my career in athletics and administration. Still, I was about to take over a school with only a 2% Black student population. Additionally, GJHS had a significant Pacific-Islander population, a culture I was completely unaware of before coming to Springdale. I wondered if I could be as effective as I had been elsewhere in a school with over 80% of my students coming from homes where English was not the primary language. Those concerns lingered throughout the summer of 2021 — right up until around 7:30 am on the first day of school. It took about thirty minutes and countless jaw drops of children marveling at the largest Black man they had ever seen. With mouths agape, they asked, "Are you our *principal*?" Each time I said, "Yes," I was met with high fives and handshakes. In that moment, I realized two things to be true. First, I texted my superintendent and said, "You were right; I got this." Second, I knew my educational activism would continue. These students saw me as an advocate and a reflection of themselves from the first day of school. I had a responsibility to figure out how to direct my activism and advocacy to a new group of kids. Challenge accepted.

MARRIAGE

Here, our respective relationships with activism unite in place and purpose when the teacher and doctoral researcher found the administrator who supported her research efforts to give students a voice. This section details how our marriages to activism converged at GJHS, a school with a unique combination of native Spanish speakers and students from the Marshall Islands. In a political climate cracking down on critical pedagogy, the administrator supported the teacher's EdD research that illuminated how a system that claims to support and develop LTELs' literacy was not achieving its purpose. Concurrently, the principal found an ally to his activism who does not look like him and thus, has a perspective from the racial majority. Unfortunately, this type of alliance has been historically necessary for creating change in issues regarding race in our country (Denevi & Cohen, n.d.).

The Union Begins—Principal's View

Regardless of race, gender, or other differentiating factors, students are fundamentally the same in their need to be cared for and loved. They want people to be truthful and honest with them. Surprisingly, some want to be held accountable. Kids know that if you are unwilling to hold them accountable, you do not care about them. When I reflected on these truths, students at GJHS were not so new to me after all.

I became hyper-focused on finding as many activist-minded teachers as I possibly could. We needed teachers willing to see beyond the deficit mentality and go all out to provide a pathway toward a better future for our students. There was one teacher-activist in particular whom I was made aware of in the summer of 2021. She had been a budding activist for ELs in our building before my arrival. However, at the end of the 2020–2021 school year, she transferred to another junior high in our district, and I could not talk her into staying. However, I was determined to get her back at GJHS. While a dearth of teachers who looked like our students remained, this teacher was a partner I knew I needed. Her doctoral research sought to hear students' voices, giving undeniable evidence to the district and educational community to pay attention to the unique needs of LTELs.

Teacher's EdD Research

After a year of teaching ELD 4, the highest level of the class filled primarily with LTELs, I realized ELD was not having its intended effect. Not only was the prescribed curriculum content uninteresting and disengaging to the students, but it also instilled in them a sense of dread toward the class that seemed to precede the box. In my mind, our school and, arguably, the entire district was obligated to understand LTELs, what they needed, and what they wanted ELD to be.

USC's EdD program guided me through the action research process (Herr & Anderson, 2015) to give voice to students' perceptions of ELD and their designation as ELs. I also wanted to see if adapting the ELD content using elements of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and multicultural education (Banks, 2014) combined with constructivist practices in English language teaching (Reyes & Vallone, 2008) might shift their perceptions. My research questions included:

1. What are LTELs' perceptions of the standard ELD curriculum?
2. How does an adapted unit affect LTELs' perceptions of ELD 4?
3. What do LTELs' counter-stories reveal about their experience as language learners?

I adapted one unit of the boxed ELD curriculum that focused on identity, collecting pre and post-quantitative data using an author-developed tool (Staeheli, 2023). Data revealed that students did not want to be in ELD at all, which was no surprise. What was surprising was that both before and after the adapted unit, students did not seem to see or even want a classroom that incorporated their cultures. They enjoyed the identity unit, but to them, culture was not academic. I also used free-write journals to collect data on students' counter-stories–narratives of their lived experiences that went beyond the pervasive stories of deficit (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Two themes emerged that echoed what I found in the survey results: (a) the overall negative feeling of being in ELD and students' desire to "get out," in contrast to (b) the perceived benefit of the class.

As the data illustrated, by the time these students entered junior high, they wanted nothing to do with ELD, and this negativity contributed to the ineffectiveness of the class. I also saw that long-standing school policies took a subtractive approach to language teaching (Reyes & Vallone, 2008), promoting assimilation to hegemonic culture, and essentially erasing the cultural and educational foundation students brought with them (Darder, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999). By intentionally keeping students' cultures out of their learning, the district made students self-reinforce this hegemonic stance that their languages and cultures were not academic enough to include in their learning. Despite negative perceptions, the curriculum convinced students that the system was working at improving their language, even though all evidence indicated otherwise.

At my invitation, the district's Assistant Director of ESL attended my defense. I also brought this knowledge to our ESL Director, but they have not chosen to take action. As the largest district in the state, Springdale is seen as a leader in EL education, presenting a culture of innovation and forward-thinking. However, "The stronger

the culture, the more firmly it resists new influences" (Evans, 2001, p. 46). The district takes pride in its reputation for educating ELs and does not see a need to implement change. With our union established, the teacher and principal realize the greatest change is slow moving. This union is in its infancy, and we are prepared to face the work yet to be done.

MOVING FORWARD

As recently as 1995, Black students at the UofA were warned not to travel the 10 miles to Springdale alone or after dark, reflecting its status as a sundown town, a community that for decades was all White on purpose (History and Social Justice, 2022). Fast-forward 30 years, this same town has approximately 23,000 students, 62% of whom are Hispanic or Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 70% qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. While the city population experienced a 133% growth between 1990 and 2010, the ethnic minorities have not demonstrated financial growth at the same rate (Stewart, 2012). Times have changed, and we as educators must change with them. We cannot expect students to enter our halls and fit the student mold that has existed for so long. We need to open our minds, including understanding the natural hurdles accompanying students with dominant languages other than English.

Unfortunately, while our population is growing and becoming more diverse, the political environment is moving in other directions. The conservative majority is cracking down on what they call *indoctrination*. Paula Ryan (2021), a writer for a socially conservative and Christian fundamentalist lobbying organization, claimed that students are being taught that everything about U.S. society is inherently racist. She also spoke against the idea that full racial equity requires transforming existing systems. Arkansas elected Sarah Huckabee Sanders, former Trump Administration press secretary, as Governor in 2022, immediately going on the offensive against indoctrination and all things woke. The most sweeping educational reform act in recent Arkansas history, the LEARNS Act, follows plans from an executive order issued on Sanders's first day in office to prohibit teaching that "would indoctrinate students with ideologies, such as Critical Race Theory" (Grajeda & Field, 2023). Anti-wokeness is a regular focal point of her public comments, preventing teachers from incorporating race or any critical pedagogy in their classes for fear of getting fired.

All changes have restricted our capacity to be activists for our students while simultaneously making it even more important that we tirelessly advocate for them. We continue to fight to put the results of this EdD research and our experiences into action with our school and our district. To teach students how to become advocates for themselves, we created a Principal's Cabinet that gives our students a voice in decisions that affect them at school. Students meet with the principal and members of the Superintendent's Executive Team once a month and propose changes they would like to see in our school. Their voices have led to installing student microwaves in the cafeteria, adding an extra minute to passing periods, lifting the ban on hats in the building, and implementing more lunch choices. We make students feel like they have a real voice and choice in their education because they do. People are less likely to tear things down that they helped build, and students are no different.

We expect our students to achieve at a high level, and we do not accept less than their best effort. Accountability is our love language. They know we believe in them because our actions show as much. We continually instill a mindset in our faculty and staff to focus on our locus of control. We do not discuss issues we cannot change, including socioeconomics, ethnicity, or family life circumstances, the traits that so often go hand-in-hand with deficit thinking. Rather, we work to ensure our students and teachers shed the deficit mentality. In a world that tries to make them feel inadequate and inferior, we attempt to instill in them the sense that they can move mountains if they believe they can and are willing to work for it.

We want to ensure our advocacy does not stop when our students leave our two-grade band school. We are working together to address the White native-speaking teacher's superiority and the hegemonic White narrative of deficit-mindedness to demonstrate to our students that their languages and cultures do have academic value. We seek to lessen the dearth of teachers from cultural and linguistic backgrounds similar to our students by providing future educators a path to opportunities offered through the UofA. A step in this direction has been hiring former GJHS students in their senior year of high school to act as Marshallese parent liaisons. While working here, they have enrolled in the Project of Ensuring Learner Equity Via Advocacy & Teacher Education or ELEVATE. It is an innovative, interdisciplinary project at the UofA aimed at increasing teacher diversity and providing professional development opportunities for educators working with dual language and emergent bilingual students in PK–12 schools (University of Arkansas, 2022). Additionally, the principal has worked with UofA faculty members to develop DOPE! the Diversifying our Public Educators program. DOPE! is a resource group for UofA students from diverse backgrounds on their way to becoming licensed K–12 teachers (University of Arkansas, 2023).

Though our origins come from entirely different places, figuratively and literally, and our courtship journeys have taken us places we never thought possible, our shared commitment to the advancement of students who have been marginalized for a multitude of reasons has solidified our marriage to activism. Just like with any relationship, there has to be a foundation of trust and common commitment. We have to wake up each morning with a drive to do more because our students deserve it. We have to be willing to speak up and speak out because our voices possess the power to change lives. In this union, there is no divorce. Even as our upward professional mobility may separate us physically one day, our bond won't be broken until success for all truly means success for all.

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