

# **A Pedagogy of Solidarity: Resisting Capitalism’s Disabling Processes in a Primary Grade Classroom**

**Scott Ritchie**

*Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia, USA*

## **Abstract**

*Primary and secondary education under capitalism serves as an ideological apparatus to construct productive workers who will participate in the extractive economy and consent to their own exploitation. However, some school children are marked as deficient—impaired, disabled, and mad—incapable of being good workers who facilitate capitalist accumulation. Just as capital banishes incapacitated workers to the reserve army of labor, so too do school children learn to “surplus” and “disable” their peers who do not meet school norms.*

*In this paper, I use a revolutionary Marxist perspective to analyze empirical data from a grade 1 United States classroom where students were teasing a neurodivergent classmate and excluding her from participation. I explore how the teacher intervened by using critical literacy to design a curricular unit on hidden disabilities that would engage her students in transformative, disability justice, and how students built a community around their disabled peers.*

*Along the way, I explore how disability is a relation under capitalism rather than an identity; how nature gives us diverse bodyminds but it is capitalism that disables us; how the education system in capitalist societies is a vehicle for the dissemination of ruling class ideologies of productivity; how some school children are surplus and labeled as incapable of being*

*good workers who facilitate capitalist accumulation; and possible solutions—what educators, parents, caregivers, and others can do about it.*

**Keywords:** *early childhood education, disability, reserve army, critical literacy, solidarity*

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### **Classroom Vignette**

It is early November, and elementary schools here in the United States South have been in session for three months, since the beginning of August. Anh<sup>i</sup>, a six-year-old nonspeaking Vietnamese-American girl, has just recently been mainstreamed into regular education, attending first grade with her non-disabled peers for the majority of the school day for the first time, after being segregated in a “self-contained” special education classroom for over a year.

It started out with seemingly innocent requests. Anh's classmates realized that although she is nonspeaking, upon command, she will utter certain words.

“Say strawberry.”

“Say peanut.”

“Say stupid.”

“Say shut up.”

When Anh had been in the class full-time for around two weeks, the teacher, Ms. Heather Simmons, received a phone call from Anh's mother. "My child came home today and said, Mommy, you suck. What in the world is going on in your classroom?"

After talking with some of the other teachers in the school, Anh's teacher Heather realized that this teasing had been going on in other classes, as well. The physical education (P.E.) and music teachers told Heather that they did a lot of partner or group work in their classes, and when they asked children to work in pairs, no one wanted to be Anh's partner and that they (the teacher) would partner with her since nobody else would do it.

While it would perhaps have been easiest simply to ask students to stop asking Anh to say inappropriate things, Ms. Simmons decided to teach a curricular unit on disability using critical literacy (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015). Although it might have been much easier simply to tell her students not to manipulate Anh into saying inappropriate things, Ms. Simmons decided to take advantage of the opportunity to use critical literacy in order to overcome division and build class solidarity.

In this paper, I use a revolutionary Marxist perspective to analyze empirical data from a grade 1 United States classroom whereas we have seen, students were teasing a neurodivergent classmate and excluding her from participation in daily activities. I explore how the teacher intervened by using critical literacy to design a curricular unit on hidden disabilities that would engage her students in transformative justice and how students built a community around their disabled peers. Along the way, I make the following argument. The disabling process under capitalism individualizes us as atomized subjects. This allows the pathologization of individuals as un(der) productive and obscures the

sociopolitical causes of exploitation and oppression. Schools function as an ideological arm of the capitalist class, whereby kids in schools tease, harass, and bully each other, performing the disabling and surplus-producing function that capitalism plays among adults outside of school. Things don't have to be this way, however. Critical literacy helps kids resist disablement, build class solidarity, and prepare for the radical reorganization of society that is necessary to meet the needs of *all* people.

## Research Design

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I spent four months in Heather Simmons' classroom while she engaged in a qualitative practitioner research project (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) with her Grade 1 students in a public elementary school in the southeastern United States. Heather's inquiry was designed to address two primary research questions: How can a primary grades teacher develop a curriculum to help students stop engaging in ableist oppression of their classmate? How can critical literacy serve as a vehicle for overcoming division and building solidarity among primary grades children?

Heather's classroom was considered a special education "inclusion" classroom because it included a group of students eligible to receive special education services and had a full-time special education paraprofessional. This class of 20 students was relatively racially diverse, consisting of approximately 50% white students and 50% students of color, including children who identified as Black, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian, and multiracial. From November to March, I video- and audio-recorded a total of 13 90-minute language arts lessons. Heather was the primary instructor during these visits, while I observed the classroom, recorded conversations, interacted with the students, and occasionally co-taught. In addition to collecting video and audio

recordings, I also gathered student work samples and took field notes. I reviewed these artifacts with Heather each day to inform future instruction, and after each lesson I watched and listened to the recordings, paying special attention to shifts or changes in students' attitudes and behavior toward their 'disabled' peers. I was looking for evidence of catalytic validity (Lather, 1986); this participatory inquiry would demonstrate validity insofar as the project served as a catalyst for positive social change. If effective, students would show more comradely behavior toward the classmates they previously isolated and teased and the study would generate "knowledge that is helpful in the struggle for a more equitable world" (Lather, 1986, p. 67). As Torres and Reyes (2011) maintained, this search for knowledge was "not merely intellectual activity but a search for answers to questions such as: Knowledge for what purposes? For whom? By whom? Why? What is transformed? And in whose interest?" (p. 54).

Using Paulo Freire's theories about generating curriculum from the world of the learners (Freire, 1997; 2004; 2005a; 2005b; Shor & Freire, 1987), Heather wanted to engage her students in a generative curriculum. Freire (1998, 2004) argued that educators must not only teach students to read the "word" (literacy, official subject matter) but must also teach them to read their "world" (the sociopolitical world in which they exist) and analyze structural inequities so that they have the ability to intervene and act for social change. Freire (2005a, 2005b) outlined a method he and his colleagues used that involved the use of generative themes to teach literacy and develop critical consciousness. Using generative themes serves as a foundation of education; a liberatory educator starts with the world of the learners, the "present, existential, concrete situation," which must then be posed as "a problem which challenges them and requires a response" (Freire, 2005b, p. 95-96). "One of the most important tasks of critical educational practice," Freire emphasized, "is to make possible the conditions in which the learners...engage in the experience of assuming

themselves as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons” (1998, p. 45).

In recent years, early childhood and critical literacy scholars have built upon Freire's theories to expand upon the idea of emergent/generative curriculum with young children (Jones & Nimmo, 1994; Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015; Wood, 2005) as a springboard to taking action for social justice. Critical literacy teachers help their students read the word and the world in order to re-imagine, rewrite, and transform society. Heather was eager to try critical literacy as a possible antidote to the teasing and disablement she witnessed in her classroom. As an action researcher studying her own teaching practice, Heather wanted to see if critical literacy could help her students overcome the ableist oppression in which they had been engaging. While it is not uncommon for elementary students to isolate, tease, and bully their peers because of perceived differences, such behaviors often unknowingly serve capitalism by sorting kids into productive and un(der)productive workers and oppressing children marked as deficient.

### **Individualizing, Disabling, and Surplusing Individual Subjects**

One of the features of capitalism is that it encloses, atomizes, and individualizes us. Like the enclosure of communal land that occurred during primitive accumulation (Marx, 1967a), capital also encloses collectivities into individual subjects (Au, 2018; Federici, 2004; Means, Ford, & Slater, 2017; Roberts, 2016). This process of individualization in capitalist societies starts young, and it is particularly relevant to the labeling and pathologization of children who are marked as impaired. Capitalism works to obscure its atomization and disabling process by socially constructing disability into an identity rather than a relation. As Carpenter and Mojab (2017) wrote, “...[O]ne of the central characteristics of life within a capitalist mode of production is that we do not experience our lives

as social or co-operative. Rather, we work under the conception that we are individual, independent and self-sufficient” (p. 49). This individualization is particularly true when it comes to disability, as Oliver and Barnes (2012) asserted, “...it is an inescapable fact that within modern, capitalist societies, disability is produced as an individual problem” (p. 52). Making disability an individual problem masks its structural origins. The mental health system seeks to “normalize the fundamentally oppressive relations of capitalism by focusing on the individual—rather than society—as pathological and in need of adjustment...” (Cohen, 2016, p. 19). We are taught to “discuss mental health in terms of individual identity (something we are) and property ownership (something we have) - rather than as a form of collective oppression (something that is done to us)” (Frazer-Carroll, 2023, p. 6). This identitarian view of disability serves the interests of capital.

We are individualized as disabled under capitalism, and such individualization obscures social causes, but in addition, disabled people are also marginalized as part of the reserve army of labor, the relative surplus population whose presence exerts downward pressure on wages for those who do work (Slorach, 2016). “The relative surplus-population exists in every possible form. Every labourer belongs to it during the time when he is only partially employed or wholly unemployed” (Marx, 1967a, p. 600). Russell argued that “A primary basis of *oppression* of disabled persons (those who could work with accommodations) is their exclusion from exploitation as wage laborers” (Rosenthal, 2019, p. 14, emphasis added). Being part of the surplus population is a form of exclusion and oppression, as an entire class of people is maintained to instill fear into those who labor and to let them know they are disposable and replaceable (Cabral, 2022; Slorach, 2016).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, following the Bolshevik Revolution, Marxist Soviet developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky asserted that disablement is a social process. Unlike his Western predecessors who followed a biomedical model and focused on positivist individualized cognitive and behaviorist psychology, Vygotsky used Marxist dialectical materialism that emphasized the role that cultural and historical mediation plays in human development (Knox & Stevens, 1993, Malott, 2022; Roth, 2011). Most educators in the United States and Western countries are familiar with Vygotskian concepts of socially mediated learning such as the zone of proximal development, but few understand that Vygotsky's collectivist approach arises from Marxism, as Vygotsky's Marxism (like Freire's) has largely been stripped and sanitized through U.S. propaganda (Malott, 2022).

Working with children who had what we would call both physical and mental disabilities, Vygotsky (1993) was clear on the fact that humans have a range of bodyminds and abilities, but it is society which disables some of us. Aware of the fact that many people equate physiological differences with impairments, Vygotsky implored us to think differently—that so-called defects or impairments exist only in the mind of the observer:

We want to imagine how a blind person experiences his blindness, and to this end, we come up with some preconceived notions based on our own daily, normal personal experience from which we subtract light and visual perception of the world...A seeing person's notion that blindness means living in constant darkness (or that deafness means complete submersion in silence and muteness) is an incorrect, naive opinion, representing a false attempt on the part of normal seeing people to delve into the psychology of the blind...A blind person does not directly sense the dark and in no way feels submerged in blackness... (pp. 80-81)



Vygotsky sought to understand disablement from a collectivist perspective—how disablement was socially mediated—and consequently how overcoming disablement was equally socially mediated through collective, social education. Vygotsky described how the idea of impairment and the idea of disability are socially constructed. He maintained:

A deaf person who speaks and a blind person who works are both participants in life in the full sense of the word. They will not consider themselves abnormal and will not give others grounds to think so. It is our responsibility to see to it that a deaf, blind, or mentally retarded [intellectually disabled] person is not handicapped. Only then will this notion, which, in itself, is a true sign of our own inadequacy, disappear.

...Physically, blindness and deafness will still exist on earth a long time. A blind person will remain blind and a deaf person deaf, but they will cease to be handicapped because a handicapped condition is only a social concept...Blindness by itself does not make a child handicapped; it is not a defective condition, an inadequacy, abnormality, or illness. Blindness becomes these things only under certain social conditions of a blind person's existence. This is a sign of the difference between his behavior and the behavior of others.

Social education will conquer physical handicaps. When this occurs, probably no one will understand us if we say that a blind child is defective; instead, they will say that a blind person is blind and a deaf person is deaf and *nothing more* (p. 83-84, emphasis in original)

None of the things we might call impairments such as blindness, deafness, or low IQ are considered impairments by Vygotsky; he recognized diversity of bodyminds. For Vygotsky, a full range of human physiologies exist, and none is naturally defective. If a defect exists, it is only in the minds of the rest of us—we disable others through our own narrow attitudes and beliefs. Because disablement is socially constructed, the solution is equally socially constructed: collectivist, social education (see Ritchie, 2023).

Other disability activists and scholars have also developed historically materialist theories of the disabling process. The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), working with The Disability Alliance, developed a set of fundamental principles of disability (1976) that was unique because it was written from within the disabled community rather than from outsiders and because it challenged popular models of disability such as the medical model that located disability in individuals. The UPIAS wrote, “In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people” (UPIAS, 1976, p. 4). This definition has come to be referred to as the “social model” of disability (Oliver, 1990; Oliver & Barnes, 2012). A range of scholars (Chis, 2023; Oliver, 1990; Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Rosenthal, 2019; Russell & Malhotra, 2019; Withers, 2012) have built upon these social models of disability to argue that the process of disablement is not only social but political; we are considered disabled or not depending on the political economy and the mode of production. This means that for most of the world, capitalism is what disables. While people in pre-capitalist and non-capitalist contexts (such as pre-revolutionary Tsarist Russia that Vygotsky was writing about) have been considered to have impairments and have sometimes been segregated from society because of their differences, the transition from agrarian feudal societies to industrial capitalism produced an entirely new, exacerbated phenomenon of disablement (Finkelstein, 1980; Oliver, 1990).

Historian Roddy Slorach (2016) wrote about how in feudal society, families lived in large groups and worked the land. This work was seasonal, with “long periods of leisure interspersed with shorter periods of intense labour” (p. 73). The communal living environment enabled support networks for social reproduction activities such as child-rearing and caring for the elderly. Unlike under capitalism, these conditions were such that most people, regardless of “ability,” could participate in daily life: “there was no concept of literacy or

intellectual ability. Every family member would have taken part in the daily grind of fetching water and firewood, ploughing the fields, or feeding the animals” (p. 73). This corresponds to Finkelstein’s Phase I society: the “economic base in Phase I, agriculture or small-scale industry, did not preclude the great majority of disabled people from participating in the production process, and even where they could not participate fully, they were still able to make a contribution” (Oliver, 1990, p. 27).

The transition to capitalism produced disabilities. Many people who could participate in economic life under pre-capitalist societies were subjected to the processes of disablement of industrial capitalism, either because they were assigned to the reserve army outright or because their bodymind (body: blood and flesh, mind: nerve and brain) was injured while they labored under hazardous conditions. With the transition to capitalism came industrialization and demanding factory work. Marx (1967a) wrote about the factory machinery’s emphasis on speed: “Wheels, rollers, spindles and shuttles are now propelled at increased and increasing rates; fingers must be quicker and defter in their movements to take up the broken thread, for, if placed with hesitation or carelessness, they are sacrificed...” (footnote p. 401), for “Capitalist production...more than any other mode of production, squanders human lives, or living labor, and not only blood and flesh, but nerve and brain” (Marx, 1967b, p. 88). The collectivist and communal agrarian living environment with a social safety net had been replaced with individual, grueling work that demanded a fast pace. The high number of accidents created new categories of disabled and surplus workers and instilled fear into those who were able to work.

Like Russell and Malhotra (2019), I take the view that disability is a “socially created category derived from labor relations, a product of the exploitative

economic structure of capitalist society; one which creates (and then oppresses) the so-called *disabled* body as one of the conditions that allow the capitalist class to accumulate wealth” (p.2, emphasis in original). Under the conditions of capitalism, disability is a relation to the mode of production. Rather than an *a priori* biomedical disorder, disability is an *effect* of the political economy, of capitalism. As Matthews (2021) argues, the “single most significant determinant of disability is the organization of the mode of production based on the maximization of profit.” This is a historically- and socially-contingent relationship that changes depending on the mode of production and the particular temporal and geographic context (Oliver, 1990). I may be considered sane and abled under certain conditions and mad and disabled under others. Disability is not an identity; it is a relation. It is not my particular bodymind characteristics that cause my disablement; it is my relationship to capitalist productivity. Thus, while other models of disability—the Disability Rights Movement, anti-psychiatry, Mad Studies, Disability Justice, etc.—each have strengths to offer, because they view madness and disability as an identity not a relation, they fail to offer a Marxist class analysis and solution other than reform under capitalism.

### **Capitalist Ideology of Disablement in Schools**

Let us return to the question of how young children in school take up the ideas disseminated by the capitalist class and reproduce the relations of capitalism by actively segregating, surplusing, and disabling their peers.

Marx (1970) argued that the structure of every society is composed of an infrastructure or economic base (the productive forces and relations of production) and a legal and political superstructure. A capitalist political economy, with its exploitative relations of production, must use the cultural institutions of the superstructure to continually win the people's consent that the

exploitation is acceptable to them. This is why Marx and Engels (1947) wrote, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (p. 39)—the capitalist class owns major media and communication outlets and gets to control the narrative. Althusser (2001; 2014) called the dissemination of the ideas of the ruling class the *ideological state apparatus*. Contrasting it with the physical force of the repressive state apparatus, Althusser claimed that the educational or scholastic ideological state apparatus is the most dominant, arguing that “...no other ideological State apparatus has the obligatory (and not least, free) audience of the totality of the children in the capitalist social formation, eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven” (2001, p. 105). Similarly, Gramsci (1971) argued that the dominant group, the ruling class, does not have to use coercive power to win people over; the bourgeoisie disseminates its ideology through the “spontaneous consent” of the masses, as “this consent is “historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (p. 12). Likewise, Freire (1998) argued that the state’s ideological brainwashing of students need not include the “truculent suffocation” practiced by despotic kings, feudal lords, colonizers, or factory owners; education domesticates and bureaucratizes the minds of its pupils: “We are speaking of that invisible power of alienating domestication, which attains a degree of extraordinary efficiency in what I have been calling the bureaucratizing of the mind” (p. 102).

Perhaps nowhere is this process of ideological conditioning more prominent than in the Global South and the former colonies. We have as much to learn from the Marxist revolutionary liberation struggles as we do from the imperialist core. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Thiong’o (1986) argued that “most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized,” for “[e]conomic and political control can never be complete or effective without

mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others” (p. 16). This mental control and colonizing of the mind led Cabral (2016) to persuade others, “We should work a lot to extinguish the colonial culture in our heads, comrades” (p. 115). Sankara (2007) concurred, urging the United Nations General Assembly in 1984 not to leave the “enemies of yesterday and today” with an “exclusive monopoly over thought, imagination, and creativity” (p. 158). Fanon (1963) described how education domesticates: “In capitalist societies, the educational system ...serve[s] to create around the exploited person an atmosphere of submission and inhibition which lightens the task of policing considerably” (p. 38). As with scholars from the imperial core, revolutionary scholars and liberation movement leaders from former colonies urged us to consider how the violence of brute physical force and the ideological violence of colonizing people’s minds are two sides of the same capitalist, imperialist coin.

As Marxist educators have shown, there is a correspondence between the kinds of workers capitalism wants and what is taught in schools (Anyon, 1981; Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Roberts, 2015). Children are subjected to a litany of psychological rewards and punishments to mold them into individual docile and productive workers. One example in the U.S. is an emphasis on “perfect attendance” where kids are rewarded for “clocking in” to school every day. From day one, kids are taught that they are individuals and that their successes and failures in life are because of their own merit or lack of it. Some scholars have argued that psychological manipulation is infused throughout our society and is especially prominent in schools (Parker, 2007). The six- and seven-year-old kids in Ms. Simmons’ class had already picked up on this. They were enacting the role that society had taught them: we isolate, alienate, and surplus people who are different than us, especially those whom society disables. By

unwittingly consenting to the hegemonic ideology of the ruling capitalist class, school children perform the sorting function of capitalism.

### **Critical Literacy Pedagogy in Heather's Classroom**

By adopting a critical literacy framework, Ms. Simmons could help rebuild solidarity among her students and help them treat each other in a comradely fashion. This is the approach she used:

1. Disrupt the commonplace
2. Interrogate multiple perspectives
3. Focus on the sociopolitical
4. Take action for social justice

(Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008, 2015)

### **Disrupting the Commonplace**

In critical literacy, disrupting the commonplace means seeing the everyday through new lenses, problematizing commonsense understandings and asking whose interests are being served (Lewison, Flint, & Van Sluys, 2002; Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015). As described above, Heather Simmons' first grade students were isolating and teasing their classmate, Anh. Heather gathered the children together on the carpet while Anh was not in the room to have a discussion about it:

Heather: We have had so many different friends in our classroom this year who are all different. And you know, we have had Anh join our class full-time a couple of weeks ago when before she just came in the morning. And you know, at first when Anh joined us, she was really upset. And we talked about how maybe it was because it was different for her: it was kind of loud in here. Well, I noticed something. Anh's mom mentioned to me that Anh was saying some things that she had never said before. So I

kind of started watching, and that's when I heard, I found out some of my friends were asking Anh to say some things.

Aaliyah: Someone outside said, "Anh, uh, say, peanut."

Amir: Someone told Anh to say, "strawberries."

Hannah: Someone told Anh to say, "stupid."

Maya: Someone told Anh to say, "shut up."

Heather was made aware of a problem with her class after a lunch monitor repeatedly reported that her class was disruptive in the cafeteria and that Anh, a nonspeaking student who had spent previous years in a self-contained special education classroom, may have caused the behavior. Heather uncovered that some students, realizing Anh was mostly nonspeaking but would repeat what they told her to say, used this opportunity to take advantage of her. By getting Anh to utter harmful words and phrases such as "stupid," "shut up," or "you suck," these six- and seven-year-olds positioned Anh as deficient. In order to disrupt the commonplace, Heather wanted to treat these discursive utterances as texts to be analyzed and problematized so the children would see their harmful effects. While their behavior may have seemed innocent or just kids being kids, Heather's students took advantage of Anh's behaviors; by asking her to say silly or harmful things, they were performing the sorting function of capitalism. These students, along with many young children, were not familiar with the processes of disablement and how they might be complicit in surplus and disabling their own peers. Heather wanted the class to learn more about the diversity of bodyminds, with special attention to cognitive and intellectual diversity, and she started out by using children's literature as a springboard for class discussions.



Heather started by engaging in her own research on possible strategies to teach about neurodivergence. She explored resources from the *Teaching Tolerance* website (now called *Learning for Justice*), *Teaching for Change's* book store, *Rethinking Schools* magazine and books, *Open Minds to Equality*, *Exceptional Children* journal, and child-friendly magazine articles from library database searches. Heather's first teaching strategy was to read aloud books about differences and hidden disabilities (e.g., *It's Okay to Be Different*, *Crow Boy*, *My Brother Sammy*, *See the Ocean*) as a way to build schema and disrupt the commonplace notion that all people are the same or that neurodiversity is always visible (Condra, 2006; Edwards & Armitage, 2000; Parr, 2009; Yashima, 1996). In order to personalize the issue of hidden disabilities even further, Heather decided to employ the use of a *persona doll* (Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force, 1989; Heather, 2008) whose life would mimic Anh's yet create a safe way to discuss the issues around disablement that the class was facing. Heather acquired a cloth doll commonly used in preschool classrooms and deliberately changed the gender and ethnicity of the doll so the class would not figure out the doll was intended to personify Anh. While Anh identifies as a Vietnamese girl, Heather chose a doll who looked like a Latino boy and named him Luis. Although Heather was skeptical at first about how her students might react to a doll's playing the role of a new student in the class, her attitude changed when she saw how students reacted to Luis. Students wanted to know about Luis's life and hobbies, and they wanted him to come outside during recess to play with them. Several students promised they would teach him how to play baseball, soccer, and football. When confronted with the idea that Luis was non-speaking and was being taunted into saying inappropriate things, students demonstrated empathy and made connections with their real-life peers. They started to analyze their own behaviors from an outside perspective.

Heather: He knows some words, and if you point to things, Luis can tell you what you're pointing to. He knows what things are. But sometimes when he tries to get your attention he might accidentally... he might really want to get your attention, but he doesn't know the word to tell you. So he might accidentally hurt you. He doesn't do it on purpose. He doesn't mean to hurt his friends; he just...

Hannah: ...he does it on accident, like me. Like Anh.

### **Interrogating Multiple Perspectives and Focusing on the Sociopolitical**

For additional perspectives about disabilities and to help develop sociopolitical awareness about diverse bodyminds, Heather decided to bring in two guest speakers: Jeremy, a neurodiverse 5<sup>th</sup> grader at the school who had a hidden intellectual disability and Mrs. Díaz, an autistic middle school teacher who was teased and bullied as a child. Although it was too far for Mrs. Díaz to drive to visit the classroom, she made a video that Heather showed to her students. Mrs. Díaz named numerous examples of how she was teased, manipulated, and bullied as a child, excluded from her peers and oppressed because she was labeled as different. Díaz also discussed how it was her “heroes,” or other children her age when she was young who helped her navigate negative social situations, who inspired her to remain strong in the face of adversity:

...And because I acted strange, and even though it wasn't my fault, they called me names, “ugly girl” and “chicken legs,” and it hurt so, so much. When I turned around they would hide my bookbag, then they'd laugh at me, as they watched me search for it. They'd hit me in the stomach with basketballs, slamming me down to the ground. They'd throw rocks at me. They'd put gum in my hair, and make me say ugly words that would get me in trouble. They were so mean and so full of hatred, and sometimes, even though I'm an adult now the memory of it still hurts. Because it wasn't my fault. I was just born different. But I was lucky because I had a hero, Rebecca. She told me time and time again, “you are beautiful, you're smart, and it's not your fault. They just don't understand.” And she protected me and spent time with me. She spent hours teaching me how to throw a ball and how to not run away to hide

in corners. Instead of ignoring me and leaving me out because I was lost in my own world, she taught me things I needed to know, like that fairies and witches aren't real, they're just made up. And like, if you always stick your fingers in your ears, people are going to think you are really, really strange. She even helped me with my homework and gave me books to read, and I was so grateful.

Students were visibly moved by Mrs. Díaz's video and applauded loudly afterward. Heather and her students had class discussions about how these are not isolated incidents; they are common and in fact form a systemic pattern across society. Heather was thus able to insert missing voices and engage her students in a sociopolitical critique (Ritchie, 2013) that built their critical consciousness (Freire, 2005a, 2005b) and enabled them to take action. While going too deeply into how capitalism uses culture to perform its sorting function would have been difficult young students, Heather was starting to see shifts in the children's thinking that demonstrated political awareness. Reeling on the momentum built after the teacher-made video, Heather and her students co-developed a list of "How to Be a Hero to People with Disabilities" (see Figure 1). While there is an established critique of hero or savior narratives in the literature, Ms. Simmons made the decision to employ the terms used by the guest speaker for consistency. After all, revolutionaries like Lenin wrote about their own heroes of the revolution, such as the Red Guards (Lenin, 1972).

### **Taking Action for Social Justice**

Heather decided to engage students in a modified version of "Theatre of the Oppressed" (Boal, 1985; 2002) an interactive form of theatre based on Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* whose goal is to help transform inequitable conditions. In forum theatre, "spect-actors" (a term Augusto Boal used to describe the dual role of actor and spectator) take turns acting out short scenes that exemplify oppression from their daily experience and try to change the

outcomes. After a few people act out a scene, an audience member may take the place of one of the actors, and the scene is re-enacted to envision what might happen if something were changed. Heather wanted students to practice trying out new interventions when they witnessed the disabling of their peers and ask themselves, "Might this approach yield better results?" Several groups of students pretended to tease a neurodivergent student, some telling the child to say inappropriate things like "shut up," much like what happened to Anh. Heather reminded students to use what they learned from the video when determining new approaches to try during the skits. However, the forum theatre intervention was largely unsuccessful, as students had not been provided enough time to learn the anti-bullying strategies, and the spect-actors did not know how to intervene. Trying to enact forum theatre without first doing the prerequisite steps such as knowing the body and image theatre (Boal, 1985; 2002) turned out to be unproductive, so Heather abandoned this approach and reviewed with the class what they had learned about possible ways to take action to disrupt the disabling process in schools.

When the students in Heather's class discovered the other classes in the school had not been learning about disablement—that they were the only class learning about this topic—they wanted to share their new knowledge with others. Heather helped the students brainstorm options for taking action to experience a sense of collective agency.

Heather: You know what guys, I am so proud of you. I have seen changes in your behavior since we've started doing these lessons. I've seen you guys really stand up for your friends and be heroes. And you guys have done a super job... ((*Sees Kaitlin raising hand*)). Yes, Kaitlin.

Kaitlin: Like me and Alexis, we were like playing with Anh outside and helping her do stuff.

Heather: Right. Helping her do stuff. And Alexis has been stepping up and helping Anh during *Daily Five* time. And that's being a good friend.

Kyle: And I've helped Anh a lot with not touching things that she's not supposed to.

Heather: Right. And Kyle, I've seen you stand up and be a good friend to Ansley [neurodivergent student in another class].

*((Heather discusses with the class they are the only ones doing these lessons.))*

Hannah: I think we can be teachers and show others the right way.

Heather: Class, Hannah says you can show them the right way. How can you show them? Is there something special that you could do? *((Sees Kaitlin raising hand))*.

Kaitlin.

Kaitlin: Maybe like, like, the whole class could go in the other first grade teachers' rooms and talk about being a hero for others.

Heather: You could go in and talk about being a hero. Okay. So that would teach the other first grade classes. What other ways could we reach out to the school?

Anjali: We could go to every single class in the school.

Heather listened to students' ideas for how to take action and decided to form three groups so that each student could choose the activity with which they felt most comfortable. Heather tried to provide a range of entry points that allowed for various students' strengths (e.g., actions that required public speaking as well as others suited to more introverted kids). One group would go to other first grade classes to tell them what they had learned about how to be a "hero" or ally/accomplice to people with disabilities. Another group would make posters to hang on school grounds. A third group would share on the school's morning video announcements what they had learned and how other students could be allies to people with disabilities.

The other teachers in the building noticed a remarkable difference in Heather's students' behavior. They asked Heather what she was doing in her classroom, because they wanted to do it, too. Anh suddenly had a community of peers who

wanted to be her partner, who included her in every activity, who never asked her to say harmful phrases. The P.E. and music teachers no longer had to partner with Anh during paired activities.

Heather reflected on the inquiry and remarked about the successes:

These lessons created a class that had a closer relationship with each other than any other class I have taught. They looked out for one another. They truly cared about each other. When one of them had a birthday party, the entire class went to the party. They offered to help each other if they noticed any student falling behind. They stood up for each other, played together, and helped each other. They got very defensive when other students would comment on the nonspeaking student. They came up with a plan to encourage other students to stand up when children are not treating each other nicely. The day that I heard them telling the student to say random phrases, I could have very easily told them not to say that and gone about my day. I am so glad that I took the time to listen to my students.

Although not all components of Heather's intervention were successful, critical literacy offers promise to address oppression and build solidarity under the conditions of capitalism until we restructure society. By using critical literacy/critical pedagogy, Heather engaged her class in transformative justice. Rather than punishing the kids who manipulated their neurodivergent peer, Heather sought to transform the conditions which led to the harassment. To overcome the meritocratic competitive individualism of capitalist schooling, she engaged her students in unmasking the ideology of disablement and segregation, a pedagogy of solidarity (Freire, Freire, & de Oliveira, 2016) that rebuilds community by helping kids overcome the divide and conquer techniques of neoliberal capital and engage in the collective, social education that Vygotsky (1993) called for. By building a unified working class, critical literacy, like other forms of critical pedagogy, can work toward a revolutionary

reorganization of society; it “is part of a movement toward the radical transformation of the totality of social relations” (Malott and Ford, 2015, p. 88). Ultimately, until we overthrow capitalism and replace it with a better political economy, we are stuck with disabling processes. Finkelstein (2001) argued for a radical reorganization of society: “Our society is built on a competitive market foundation and it is this social system that disables us...Nothing less than dismantling the prison and replacing it with a non-competitive form of society can break-down the doors which bar our emancipation” (p. 4). Until such a societal reorganization, teachers, caregivers, and others can engage in collective and communal activities that build and strengthen support systems for students, build community, overcome division and individualism, and create solidarity.

### **Building Solidarity to Reorganize Society**

While we go short, we must also go long. Engaging in collective education and helping students develop solidarity serves two ends: it provides social reproduction and mutual care needed *right now* while also building a strong working class capable of restructuring society in the future. In order to make the disablement process go away, we must reorganize society under a new political economy, engaging in a “world-emancipating act” (Engels, 1939, p. 310) that frees humanity from domination. As Glenn Rikowski (1997) argued, “A Marxist approach to education is concerned with setting goals that are universally beneficial...the main goal now is to *forge a collectivity around ending capitalism*” (p. 564). Because teaching for solidarity can often feel lonely and isolating, educators may find strength in networks that sustain their commitment to revolutionary change (Ritchie, 2012). We must work across differences (Sins Invalid, 2019) and build alliances—between the physically impaired and those with mental distress (Russell, 1998), between the working and surplus classes and reserve army (Rosenthal, 2019)—because a strong working class is needed to overcome capitalism, and once overcome, to

withstand counter-revolutionary forces (Becker, 2015; Lenin, 1964).

Transforming capitalism is not an option: “Hence, if capitalism is not to be transformed, the prospect of disabled people, as a group or class, becoming fully included in capitalist society is remote” (Oliver and Barnes, 2012, p. 163). As Marx and Engels (1948) asserted, the first step in overcoming capitalism and replacing it with socialism is “to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class” (p. 30)—it is through scientific socialism (Engels, 1939) that we win the “War on Disabled People” that Clifford (2020) writes about. If we believe, as Berne (2021) argued, that “all humans are valuable,” then we should organize the world “around our collective and individual value” (p. 10), not the dictatorship of the rich.

Conceptualizations of a non-disabling future are promising. Under socialism, the very experience of work will change as people have more control over their working conditions. Work will be meaningful and unalienated. People will understand work as contributing to larger social aims. We will have expanded free time to do what we want. In addition to productive tasks, we will engage in reproductive and emotional labor as we care for everyone in our community (PSL, 2022). By building a strong, heterogeneous working class movement that starts with young children, we prepare ourselves for a society that meets the needs of the 99% and not just the 1% (Rieber & Carton, 1993). In a society without disablement, “where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes,” it is “...possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner...without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic” (Marx & Engels, 1947, p. 22). In a different world, we could transform our conditions so that we are in control of our own labor, our own healing, our own healthcare, and how we name *ourselves* rather than having labels enforced on us (Frazer-Carroll, 2023). We



could ensure that all people have the resources, support, and infrastructure they need to survive and thrive. “Through a shift towards communal labour, living and wealth distribution, we could lay the foundations to finally disentangle illness from work” (Frazer-Carroll 2023, p. 89). We might labor because we wanted to or because not everyone can, creating conditions that are “self-directed, and conducive to life, joy, safety and connection, rather than suffering and destruction” (Frazer-Carroll 2023, p. 89). We could have a society that meets everyone’s needs.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> All student and teacher names are pseudonyms

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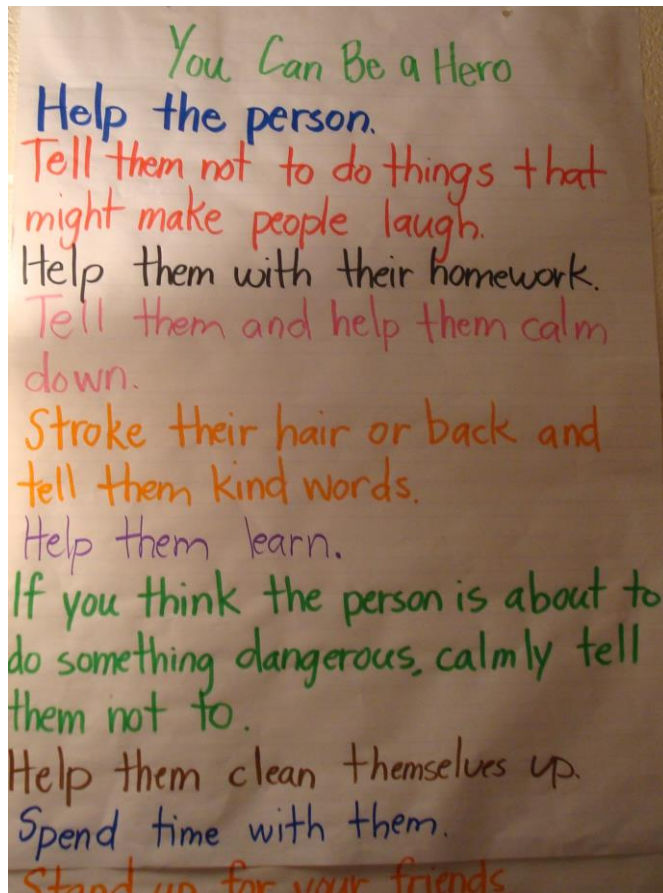
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## Appendix

Figure 1: Class brainstorm of ways to be an ally/accomplice/co-conspirator/hero to disabled peers



### Author Details

Professor of Language and Literacy Education

Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education

Affiliate, Gender & Women's Studies

585 Cobb Ave NW

Room 3123, MD 0121

Kennesaw, GA, USA 30144

1-470-578-6958

[sritchie@kennesaw.edu](mailto:sritchie@kennesaw.edu)