Be Always a Question Mark:
On Reforging Curricula in Waldorf Schools

Ryan Cameron

For the past five years, I've had the privilege of teaching English Language Arts at the Rudolf Steiner School, NYC, my alma mater. The experience of alumni returning to teach at their Waldorf school seems to be a shared one. In this scenario, of a graduate stepping as teacher into the classrooms in which she once was student, there appears to be a special glimmer between teacher and students, a thread of belonging, a sensation of being two sides of one coin. To engage with a curriculum I know and love as well as with a new generation of students feels right. At the same time, stepping into the gyre of memories, disappointments, personal joys, and the all-too-much-at-once feeling that middle school dredges up is not without its struggle. Educating is an odd exercise in time-travel, wherein one reaches back into one's past learning experiences to dream anew, with memory guiding the way forward.

Upon returning to Steiner in 2016, my mission, like the one of many of you, was to drive the curriculum towards celebrating multiracial, multicultural, non-heteronormative, and gender expansive perspectives. As a biracial person, one of two minority students in her elementary school class, I am still challenged today, as one of few faculty members of color, in navigating conversations about representation of various identities in the curriculum. I loved my Waldorf education, but at times, I recognize in hindsight, I felt a fool for loving an education that did not, while I was a student, show love for my cultural heritage, my Asian American identity. As a teacher, I vowed I would show love, through my curricular choices, to as many expressions of human identity as I had time for, but I have to admit that I definitely stumbled and made dubious choices along the way.

In the thrust of our social justice movement of the 21st Century, in which we as a society are attempting to expunge the etched roots of systemic racism from our schools, prisons, cultural institutions, and houses of government, lack of awareness is often maligned as evil intent. "White silence = violence" was a chant I heard (and uttered) often last May and June, as I took weekly to the streets of New York to protest the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of police. I, as an adult, understand that Waldorf institutions intend no violence, but it is important to understand that our students, engaged as they are with social media (as am I), view themselves as part of the movement to dismantle racism, heteronormativity, and ablism, and they may indeed view any and every lack of inclusion in their lessons as violent. Each middle school class I've taught has always had one or three or fifteen students impassioned by the rhetoric of equity, equality, and inclusion, and their voices lead their classmates into figuring out their own stances on the subject. Any teacher who does not teach with these voices in mind risks losing the trust, and therefore rapt attention, of the students. To meet the children where they are means untangling the threads of hearsay and misinformation of the internet from the true gems, that is, the voices that are doing the work of building a new narrative of history and that can be found online, in books, and in the media at large. It is up to us as teachers to model for the students what social justice is and how to apply it to their lives rather than allow the internet to do that for them.

To do this work takes awareness, curiosity, accountability, and follow-through. My school has had many successes: one class teacher added a History of Ancient Africa block to her 6th grade Main Lesson rotation, an 8th grade teacher taught the American Revolution with a focus on the Indigenous People it affected, a colleague and I, when we were asked to step in to teach the 7th Grade Renaissance Main Lesson, realized a long-held dream of ours by incorporating lessons on the Harlem Renaissance to complement the stories of the Italian Renaissance. History of the world is covered in our high school, and elementary school and early childhood teachers celebrate Diwali, Eid, Lunar New Year, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, and so on in their classrooms. All these efforts are stepping stones on the way towards "the right direction," but until we can, on an institutional level, guarantee that each and every class of students hears diverse stories, reads about experiences utterly unlike their own, and experiences Main Lessons that reliably plant seeds for diverse perspectives, our work is not done.

Rather than connect through our successes, I believe that more can be learned through our failures. As I tell my students, every mistake is a wonderful opportunity to teach oneself and those around you something you did not know before. Perhaps, being a person of color,

I have a bit more leeway to fail in my lessons on diversity, but I hope that by sharing my mistakes, my fellow Waldorf teachers could feel emboldened by their own mistakes rather than feel discouraged by the endless voices of criticism and outcries of injustice that I'm sure many teachers have weathered in the past decades. Finding the right path forward, it seems, requires tenacity through trial and error, so by investigating my own errors in judgement over the years, hopefully you can avoid some of the same social experiments I've undergone.

Fail Again, Fail Better

While attempting to build a middle school Language Arts curriculum in collaboration with each grade's class teacher, my first serious misstep in a book selection occurred during my second year at Steiner, when I taught Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* to a 6th grade class. This was a book my own class teacher loved, a book I loved as a child, and a story many of my students appeared to love; it was also a book many of the class' parents didn't love. I was prepared (though not prepared *enough*) for the conversations about the racist language in the book, but I was fully unprepared for the way in which encountering and discussing hate speech would wound our class' community and, most especially, harm the psyches of the children of color in the class. Any enjoyment the kids showed for the book felt hollow in the end because of the stain that seeing that searing slur, the n-word, in print, nine times over the course of the novel and further discussed in our conversations, sullied any linguistic beauty the book did have to offer.

From this mistake, I realized the children need a more thorough understanding of the history of racism in our country before encountering such language in literature. Even if Mark Twain's mission was to expand and diversify representation through his 19th Century novels (as I myself argued at the time), the reality I encountered was that the twelve-year-olds in front of me could not reconcile such intention with what they encountered on the page. I had learned at a Sunbridge Middle School Conference, several years ago, that if you teach what you love, your students will share in that love with you. The more recent experience with my students showed me that anachronistic love, love that was a product of a different era, does not translate well for today's child. I would have to release yesterday's love into the pastures of nostalgia and forge my way towards a new canon.

Several years later, after participating in annual workshops with a Rudolf Steiner School alumna, and one of my current educational heroes, Monique Marshall, as well as in professional development workshops with the institution *Facing History and Ourselves,* I found myself mapping identity charts with a group of 8th graders. We had just read Malala Yousafzai's eponymous memoir and had drawn an identity chart on the blackboard to show how the many facets of her personhood and cultural ancestry fueled her activism. As we went about drawing each student's own chart, I asked students to include parts of themselves that were visible to others as well as the aspects that were invisible. But when a white child asked if he could identify as Irish rather than simply "white," in my haste to get to the next activity I said no. I later learned from his father that this was hurtful to the child and his family, which allowed me to reflect on the ways in which categorizing anyone on the basis of skin color is indeed harmful.

Learning that one will at some point be expected to identify as a member of a certain race is a difficult realization for any child to navigate. Reconciling the experience of how one identifies internally with how one might be categorized by appearance can create a strange dissonance. When I was a student, I found myself blushing when historical figures from ancient China came up in class or wondering to myself why was I assigned research projects on Noh Drama and the like when my white classmates were not. As a teacher, I have found, though, that speaking frankly about difference and the numerous ways in which one can choose (and not choose) one's identity helps give a name to the numerous diversities (learning differences, gender, sexual orientation, race, and class, to name a few) that exist in any classroom. Nevertheless, I've realized it is not up to me to tell children how to identify, but rather guide them in maintaining conversations about difference in and beyond the classroom.

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Year after year, I introduce my class to the slam poem "White Boy Privilege," by then fourteen-year-old poet Royce Mann (thank you, Monique, for this resource), and I see how the white children in the class melt when they finally see in print how they, too, inherit a history of racism and white supremacy that they do not wish to see themselves as part of. The poem begins:

> Dear women, I'm sorry.
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> Dear black people, I'm sorry.
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> Dear Asian-Americans, dear Native Americans, dear immigrants who come here seeking a better life, I'm sorry.
>
> Dear everyone who isn't a middle or upper-class white boy, I'm sorry.
>
> I have started life in the top of the ladder while you were born on the first rung.
>
> I say now that I would change places with you in an instant, but if given the opportunity, would I?

Every year, a white child, often the most unruly boy in the class, comes up to me after the lesson to say thank you for teaching this poem. Just as expanding the curriculum to capture the multiplicity and intersectionality of Black, Asian, Latin, Middle Eastern, and Indigenous perspectives is important, giving children the space to new possibilities for white identity is equally important. No child can be deprived of their unique intersectional heritage and identity, even as we race along towards reform and, hopefully, redemption.

I continue to try out lesson plans that respond in varying ways to the content that class teachers introduce in their Main Lessons. I've long since replaced *Tom Sawyer* with other adventure books that feature protagonists of color and/or authors of color (I like Nancy Farmer's *The Ear, the Eye, and the Arm,* set in Zimbabwe in the year 2194, and Pam Muñoz Ryan's *The Dreamer,* which imagines the childhood of Pablo Neruda). I like teaching Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* while the eighth graders learn about the Atlantic slave trade; the book shows that Nigerians also have their own beautiful mythology, the Yoruba tradition, that inspired a fantasy series. It is also a good opportunity to introduce a novel with a black protagonist which is *not* about racial suffering.

This year, I tried pairing Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynold's *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* with the Waldorf classic *I, Juan de Pareja* by Elizabeth Borton de Treviño, aiming to ground the book's grateful slave narrative, in which a slave is depicted as loving his master and feeling lucky for his experience of servitude in a more contemporary framework (with thanks to Green Meadow's Liz Hall, who warned me of the novel's treatment of history). I'm not sure yet whether these experiments are working or, in fact, confusing the children, but I do see that arming students with language to help them navigate the changing world, quite simply, meets a need in them. Speaking directly about these topics, by engaging with the issues and reforming lesson content, offers a model for the children how to discuss such topics, rather than simply allowing them to react without guidance. Steiner says that children are messengers of the future, but we cannot let the children do the teaching for us; it is our duty to build a school curriculum and culture that provides a safe, clearly delineated space for children to explore their questions about the world they see unfolding around them. At our school, we valorize the ingenuity of the curriculum spiral, but without spiral accountability, a grave dissonance arises between the children of color we advertise on the cover of our school brochures and the content taught in classrooms. And the children notice.

We need to pass the point of merely *representing* other cultures, races, and marginalized experiences in our curriculum; we must engage with them in depth. The Black experience, Islamic history, Asian heritage, the fight for LGBTQ+ rights, etc. – all deserve prime real estate in our curricula. When parts of the story are shuffled into late-elementary school geography blocks or relegated only to the realms of fiction, the children, regardless of their race, are not served. When non-Western festivals are held primarily by the parents of students of color and not by the teachers themselves, the children, who are hard at work categorizing and observing what is of value and what is of lesser value, notice the difference. Reciting a poem by Langston Hughes while leaving the primary content of the curriculum untouched is not sufficient (I learned this the hard way). But we all have a different starting point and it is important for Waldorf institutions to state aloud, as so many do already, that we are all at different starting points in our curricular upheaval. As I say to my students (and as I learned at *Facing History*), we all bring different lived experiences, different levels of knowledge, and different assumptions to the classroom. We cannot be afraid to show curiosity, to explore, to make mistakes, to ask questions, to ask for help, and we must avoid judging each other for being beginners. We must make space to build new understandings together (and a database to support it).

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My lived experience fueled a career path in Waldorf education because I do not want any child to experience, as I did, a lack of representation of their culture in the curriculum. Being an alum and a teacher of color is, at times, a lonely experience, for the child in me wishes that my former teachers, now my colleagues, had the answers, voiced the regret, and could illuminate the path forward. But now I realize, a child no longer, that it is up to me to draft the plans for an education that I had longed for and have compassion for myself and my colleagues through my and our failures along the way.

In an address to students, included in his book of essays and meditations *A Time for New Dreams,* author Ben Okri says:

> Be always a question mark. Seek to know for yourself, so that you may grasp the deeper truths of life with a strong mind. Give of your soul. Feel the life and suffering and the joys of the world. Feel! Don't be afraid to feel, or to love, or to fail. So long as you are doing the little best you can to make this ruined world better, you are making good use of the miraculous reality that is your life.

To my fellow teachers: the pleasure of teaching is that we get to forever be students. "Be always a question mark," and we will all, hopefully, one day be able to embody the questions our students continuously ask of us. Let us not fear mistakes, lack of knowledge or imperfection. Let us acknowledge the errors we make and draw strength from an ever-growing well of curiosity for our changing world.

Ryan Lin Cameron *is a graduate of the Rudolf Steiner School NYC (Class of 2005) and of Haverford College (2009). Ryan currently teaches middle school Language Arts at her alma mater, and, before the pandemic, served as the school's elementary school librarian. Ryan lives in Brooklyn and describes her return to the Waldorf world as the work of an "After-Lifer."*