Activists, Academics, and Bridgebuilders

Selim Tlili

"**S**tand up if you think that this school is racist!" The senior leading the Students for Inclusivity, Diversity and Equal Rights club (SIDER) demanded at an upper school assembly meeting organized during Black History Month.

The room was silent as we all looked at one another. Then, all the members of SIDER stood up in unison. One by one, other students stood up. Some members of the younger faculty rose to their feet. Eventually, about half of the people in the room were standing.

The effects of this Inclusivity and Diversity event were subtle but pervasive. Faculty discussed the meeting in hushed tones when we had the opportunity to talk in private. Everybody hesitated to share opinions, and when we did, our comments were prefaced by multiple qualifiers about "not wanting to overstep or speak over a student's lived experience" and other such modifiers. We remarked about how the dialogue had dramatically shifted in tone over the last couple of years. This level of hostility was new. I couldn't speak to the novelty of this anger but I certainly did not notice it in any single meeting since I joined the school back in 2016. Suddenly it was clear that sometime, recently, the rules had changed and we were collectively caught by surprise.

A recent search on Google Trends for terms like "anti-racist," "white fragility," and "white supremacy" supports this sense that something has shifted. According to Google Trends, searches for these terms have increased over a hundredfold after 2017.

Usually, what happens in the "real world" trickles slowly into school life. But in this case what is happening in schools is magnifying out into spaces beyond educational institutions and academia. Ideas about language, privilege, and historical injustice, concepts that have mostly served as discussion points in classrooms for decades, have now become the topic of public debate. For people who have not been immersed in the conversation in recent years, it seems like the rules of what is considered acceptable had changed.

Among the demands made by faculty at one Upper East Side prep school was the call for half of all donations made to the school to be passed on to New York public schools if the school did not manage to match its student demographics to the one of the public school system in the next five years. Additionally, all students would be required to take classes on Black liberation, and all adults at the school would be required to complete annual anti-racist training. Tracked courses would have to be eliminated if Black students did not reach full parity in the next three years.

Another private school saw students engaged in a four-day sit-in because of a viral video, taken several years earlier, showing students making racist jokes. Perhaps less than five years ago, the case would have ended with some kind of disciplinary action against the offending students; that would have put the matter to a close. This time, a demand for a meaningful response came from the student body, calling on the school to mandate bias training for all faculty and staff, hire more teachers of color, provide more funding for scholarships for students of color, and implement mandatory courses in Black and Indigenous history. It seemed that every progressive school was going through some similar kind of "great awokening."

It's good for rules to change, but it now seems that the "Overton Window," the range of political viewpoints that are considered acceptable in a given time frame, had moved so much to a certain extreme that now many people like me, who were firmly entrenched in the liberal camp, are now finding themselves more closely agreeing with the center right. This shift has led to a tremendous amount of friction. Things that were once acceptable are no longer acceptable, but there was no lag time allowed for people to catch up to this transformation. All of the sudden we are told that "students have been demanding things for years and there has been no change." Teachers, who consider themselves to be a rather liberal group overall, were feeling incredibly guilty for disparities that they did not create. The guilt about these disparities made for an interesting turn of events that allowed Upper East Side private school students to lecture their teachers, even though, by every objective global measure, these students are a part of the most privileged people to ever exist on the planet.

This is the context under which I was asked to serve as co-adviser to SIDER.

I did not want to do this. I did not want to get involved in work that would be confrontational. My own sense

of autonomy and a philosophy of "to each his own" made this role quite unappealing to me. I've seen how discussing issues around race, gender, and social justice can bring out the worst in people. I've seen online "struggle sessions," where statements as innocuous as "the new Star Wars movies are terrible" have led to accusations of sexism. To put myself potentially in the line where my inherently imperfectly articulated utterances could subject me to cancel culture is something I studiously wished to avoid.

I understood why I was being asked. With an Arab father from North Africa and a Puerto Rican mother I do not look like I fit into either group, nor in the American dominant group. The absence of full acceptance in the groups of my ethnic heritage and the feeling that I don't belong, by name or culture or temperament, in the dominant WASP culture that was my high school and college experience, had left me jaded and angry. I saw a lot of bogeymen and hypocrisy, which I reveled in identifying and pointing out. The term "woke" wasn't *en vogue* in the late 90s, but I was quite woke for the time.

And being woke meant I was angry. I was irritated by the fact that French was a more popular class than Spanish at my school, even though there are far more Spanish speakers living in NYC than French speakers.

I resented that I was asked "are you a US citizen?" when I told people that I am from Puerto Rico. The fact that so many people in college didn't know that Puerto Rico is part of the United States smacked of both racial arrogance and the ignorance of an education system that does not acknowledge its colonial history.

I was incredibly angry about the fact that after 9/11, I heard a lot more jokes about my Arab heritage from friends. I was called a "terrorist" and other names that are inappropriate to mention here by people that I consider to be my friends far more than I heard those phrases earlier in my life. I was livid that nobody could consider that maybe the issues in the Middle East are more complex than the summarized version that the Arabs just wanted to go "all jihad on our ass."

I held grudges about a great many issues. And that's ok. I was at the stage in life where I was supposed to be angry. But I'm no longer in that emotional state. The last twenty years allowed me peace in understanding my cultural identity. I have found my place; here, at this institution and in the wider community. I have been searching for the better part of a decade for a career that I could grow in and I finally found it. Now I was

> It seemed that every progressive school was going through some similar kind of "great awokening".

being asked to venture into an aspect of my life that I felt I had mostly resolved.

But it was also clear that my own past experiences fully justify why I should be serving as the student club's advisor. Even if I did not share the exact same experiences as my students, my feelings as a young man were the same as theirs. At the same time, I also share the liberal intellectual tradition of the Enlightenment, promoting the belief that I should focus on teaching my students *how* to think, not *what* to think.

Given that writing is a way to clarify and understand one's own thoughts, this essay is my meager attempt to distill an understanding, my own understanding, first of what appears to me as a significant gap between different faculty members on the role of teachers in negotiating questions of diversity, and, second, how our view of the world affects the way we teach impressionable high school students. Finally, I hope to be able to reconcile whatever answers I could produce for these two questions. These observations, while intellectually informed by the work of scholars like E.D. Hirsch, author of *Why Knowledge Matters* (2016), and Jonathan Haidt, author of *Can't We All Disagree More Constructively* (2016) and co-author of *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (2018), are based on my 15 years of teaching, discussing, and connecting with teachers from across a diverse range of schools.

Activist vs. Academic

There seems to be a spectrum of thought around questions of social justice that could be categorized by three dominant mindsets among teachers. The distinction between Progressive and Conservative does not offer accurate labels, since the vast majority of teachers identify as liberal. Instead, I will use the terms "Academic" and "Activist" to explore the differences.

If I look at the teachers I know and take into account the reasons—mostly, *ideals*—that made these individual choose education as their profession, I see that the vast majority of them are well-meaning liberals who do not focus on issues of social justice. They tend to want to get along with their colleagues and they tend to be liberal minded and willing to go with the flow; at the same time, they do not explore these social justice issues of their own accord. To the left and right of this assumed majority are the "activist" and the "academic."

The "academic" mindset views the world as determined primarily by individual choices and efforts. Our

success in life is mostly determined by the consistency by which we work and our ability to delay present gratification for future benefit. This viewpoint predominates in physical education, as well as in math and science departments. The "academics" mostly belong to Gen X or even older generations. In contrast, the "activist" attitude is found more commonly among younger faculty. They are more likely to be teaching in the humanities or involved in administration or admissions. These differences are mirrored in other intellectually driven professions, such as journalism, where a fundamental ideological disagreement between older opinion editors and a younger generation of journalists has resulted in many editors resigning their positions, as we have seen this past year at the *New York Times*.

The activists tend to describe the world in terms of the gross inequalities they see and look at these inequities as something that every single person who benefits from the existing social order has a moral responsibility to address. From the activist's perspective, societal barriers are the main determinant of our life outcomes. Teachers, in this framework, bear a moral responsibility to educate and to expose the differences in outcomes; they should express the demand that whatever actions necessary must be taken in order to correct such differences. In the context of school, this translates to a focus on increasing representation of diverse identities in the school community and in the curriculum. The activist is more likely to agree with the statement, "our school's history curriculum is too focused on straight, dead, white men."

The academic, on the other hand, is focused on the idea of education as a means to creating common ground. From the academic's point of view, we are all inheritors of mankind's intellect. Homer has bequeathed all of humanity invaluable gifts in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as has Newton and every other intellectual giant upon whose shoulders we stand. The color of their skin and their sexuality, from this point of view, are irrelevant in comparison to their intellectual contributions. They might agree that there is room to expand the curriculum, but they do not approach it with the same sense of mission that the activist feels.

Both points of view have merit. It is factually correct to say that intellectual heritage is just as real as cultural heritage. It is also correct to say that there are significant disparities in achievement and outcomes among racial groups. These disparate outcomes are the result of many factors, and it would be insulting to suggest

In order to do this work of bridging the divide I needed to understand the rules by which students were operating and the narrative that framed how they view the world.

that history plays little to no part in those differences. It is also understandable when activists get upset with academics for "playing devil's advocate" or approaching these questions solely as a theoretical, even hypothetical exercise.

Many schools have spent the last two years focused on acknowledging and attempting to rectify where they have fallen short of ideals of inclusivity. Mission statements have been changed; pronouns were added to email signatures; restorative justice consultants were hired; affinity groups were created; implicit bias tests were taken; mandatory anti-racist professional development seminars were held; many more cultural festivals are being celebrated. But nobody is happy.

From the activist point of view, the work being done now should have been accomplished a long time ago and is woefully insufficient compared to what still needs to be accomplished. For the liberal majority, the reality is that many teachers feel guilty and self-conscious about discussing issues around race and often feel afraid to say or do the wrong thing. This fear puts them in a state of paralysis or incentivizes a superficial exploration of the issues. The problem from the academic's point of view is that if nothing that is being done seems to be good enough, why bother getting involved at all?

To illustrate these differences with an example: the liberal teacher may be in favor of beginning important school meetings with a land acknowledgement of the Indigenous people. The activist teachers might think that this is insufficient and would want to significantly expand the curriculum to teach more about Indigenous peoples. The academic leaning teachers are sanguine about the idea but are worried that the students won't learn enough about the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution if they devote more time to Indigenous people. If this were to become a discussion, it would most likely be a civil one among friendly colleagues, but the differences would become apparent if every faction were to articulate its opinions on the issue.

We need activists – activists see the proverbial forest and share a large moral truth that needs to be stated. Activists keep curricula from ossifying. The work of academics can be too cerebral and pay insufficient attention to the emotional needs of students. Students shouldn't only read the works of dead white men.

We need academics – academics see the individual trees and share a contextual truth that needs to be

explored. Academics keep a sense of continuity and rigor in the work. Education can provide shared norms and build human capital. The work of activists can be too heart driven and pay insufficient attention to the practical needs of students. Ideas build off each other and if we view the world of literature as a kind of continued conversation between books across history then the works of Homer and Shakespeare, that have stood the test of time and influenced countless other authors, are incredibly important and can't be summarily dismissed as part of the heritage handed down by "a bunch of dead white men."

So how do we reconcile these outlooks in our communities? I am far more of an academic than an activist, even though I agree with the activist point of view that changes are necessary. Can I be a bridge builder? Can I help my community see the forests and the trees? Am I capable of finding the common ground between these two points of view? Do my own intellectual biases make me a poor candidate to close that gap? I wasn't sure but I was determined to try.

Year One

My first year as advisor to the Students for Inclusivity, Diversity and Equal Rights club was not successful. The students did not trust me. They liked me as a teacher but they were pretty sure that I was planted by the administration to keep their revolution in check. They weren't totally wrong. I wasn't being directed by anyone but I also did spend a lot of time trying to argue with their point of view. I did it as gently as I knew how but I was essentially trying to tell them that their entire way of viewing the world was incorrect. I would site statistics to support my point of view and ask them questions that I knew they lacked the background knowledge to answer; I expected that they would be dazzled by my brilliance and by the facts and change their point of view. Looking back, it is a wonder that I thought such an approach would have even the slightest chance of succeeding with anyone, let alone with a teenager.

The year culminated with a school-wide Zoom assembly in the wake of the killing of George Floyd. In that meeting, one of the student organization's board members stated to the whole school: "You're either with us or you're against us." It wasn't clear what exactly was meant by this divisive statement, but it was emblematic of the feeling that the student club members held about the school as a whole. Other students quietly spoke to

me and told me that their peers were harassing those who did not post the black square racial justice solidarity symbol on their social media accounts. At a separate meeting with the club's board, the students asked me why the demands they made to the school four months prior have not been met yet. They didn't accept that we had made progress on four of their seven demands and that Covid had slowed down a lot of projects. One of the students said, "The school is dragging its heels on hiring teachers of color because they're racist."

> Where the tone last year was hostile, with students implying that some of their teachers are racist, they are now respectful and collaborative.

It had not been my intention to argue with the students. I was sympathetic to the fact that collectively the nation was grappling with the devastating events that took place in Minneapolis a few days earlier and that emotions were raw. But I could not let the students make accusations about teachers without challenging their logic. I asked this student to name a single racist teacher at the school. He refused to do so. I pushed harder than I should have on this point but I would not allow a student to make a blanket accusation without a single bit of evidence to support such an assertion. I asked the board members questions I knew they couldn't answer. I asked them to reflect on population demographics, the percentage of teachers of color in NYC, the history of Brown vs. Board of Ed, Equal Employment Opportunity laws and other topics that pertain to this discussion. I used my greater depth of knowledge against them like a cudgel.

The truth was that their accusation of the school of being racist hurt, and a petty part of me wanted to hurt them back. It hurt to hear them accuse my colleagues, who spend a tremendous amount of time thinking how to deliver the best education they could, of such a terrible thing. It hurt that they would paint us all in such a prejudiced light when they spent all this time supposedly fighting against prejudice. In keeping their accusations vague they were damning all of us, intentionally or not, either as racists or as tacitly accepting of racists. At the end of this meeting the students were emotionally drained and the two faculty members that joined us wouldn't speak to me. I certainly didn't feel good about my "victory."

Over the summer I did a lot of thinking. I realized that in order to do this work of bridging the divide I needed to understand the rules by which students were operating and the narrative that framed how they view the world. I read *White Fragility* to understand the language that was being used to talk about issues of racism. I read

How to be an Anti-Racist to better understand the goals of the movement. I read *Caste* to see alternative ways to frame the narrative by other activists. I read *1491*, to get a better perspective on the Americas prior to Columbus, and several essays by James Baldwin, to get a greater historical sense of the intellectual underpinnings of the social justice movement. I would never consider myself an expert even as I continue my exploration of these topics, but I believe I managed to develop enough of an understanding of the lens through which students are viewing the world to articulate the unspoken rules by which they were operating.

Year Two

I needed to become crystal clear on what I wanted to achieve. In the previous year, all I wanted to do was try and make students see the world differently. That was a mistake. It isn't my place to convince them that *I* am right no matter how gently I articulate my point of view. I've said throughout my entire career, "I don't want to teach my students *what* to think, I want to teach them *how* to think." Despite that mantra, I had to recognize that a large part of me did want to make my students think just like me. I can't say that part of me has disappeared but my greater awareness of that desire has helped to tamp down on the impulse.

I distilled my objectives into two measurable goals: I wanted students to make a clear, positive, and collaborative contribution to the school community. It was important to me that students could take on the mission of bringing change to the school in a way that would be meaningful to them without falling into the misguided view of "students against the racist teachers." Instead, I was hoping that their activism would be characterized as a collaboration between students, faculty, and administration.

I also wanted to help students avoid nurturing and cultivating resentment. Resentment is a dangerous emotion that can drive people into self-destructive behavior. We all can get addicted to the dopamine hit that we get when we find something that confirms our self-righteous view of the world. It is not healthy for students to have such significant resentment against their school community; it hinders their ability to focus on school work, which in turn could exacerbate many of the gaps that students are concerned about in the first place. If you spend your life nursing grievances, you will never run out of grievances.

As a biology teacher with a keen interest in evolutionary biology, I have read many of the works of Charles Darwin, Richard Dawkins, Steven Pinker, Ernst Mayr, Stephen Jay Gould, E.O. Wilson, Daniel Lieberman, and other scientists who have written extensively on various aspects of human evolution. From their works I have come to believe that humanity's tribal nature makes us hyper aware of two things: our perceived differences, no matter how tiny they may seem, and any appearance of unequal distribution. This focus on differences is why Capulets and Montagues could never come together, and why it is unnatural for an Ohio State graduate to marry the proud bearer of a University of Michigan diploma. In a hunter-gatherer tribe, any evidence that someone was hoarding food rather than sharing it would lead to drastic consequences for that person. These traits allowed us to survive in small groups successfully for thousands of years.

But as human life has predominately shifted from small kin groups to dense collectives, those traits that helped keep us alive have turned on us. When we compared ourselves to our neighbors, we did not mind the relatively small disparities in social status, but when we got a chance to compare our lives to the carefully curated image of a sponsored celebrity's life, we felt sucker-punched by the perceived disparity and its associated massive injustice. This is why there will never be an end to resentment – there will never be an end to perceived disparities. But we do not need to do this. We can override this if we focus on our common ground and shared sense of community and mission.

My challenge, then, is how to help steer my students away from our tribal instincts that focus on social grievance as the central paradigm and towards a focus on what is best for the school community without pushing them to think like me. It is natural for them to go into this kind of romantic view that makes the students see themselves as freedom fighters against the establishment that only cares about preserving an unjust status quo. In many ways, it is appropriate for them to go into this moral stance. I can't deprive them of their indignant phase, but I also do not want them to stay mired in it to the point that it overwhelms their ability to appreciate all the tremendous privilege that is in their life.

A shared sense of mission is pivotal to overcoming our natural tribal nature, so this year I decided to guide SIDER in working on two particular goals: discussing disparities in a larger context, and making concrete

> Members of the community feel that students should not have to bear the burden of changing the school culture; that burden, they believe, should rest upon the faculty.

suggestions for the school to diversify its curriculum. Students demanded what they imagined as a more diverse curriculum, but they did not take up the work of exploring it carefully and coming up with recommendations where the curriculum should be diversified. Their demand was simply left on the table with the expectation that it would be taken up and seen to by the faculty. Their general suggestion, to see more biographical history of important people of color, was specific and offered valuable insight into what they needed to see in their classes. This information, which we shared with the Humanities department, gave the faculty some insight into the students' thinking and will continue to inform discussions on future main lessons and track units.

Sometime in October I called the SIDER board for a meeting. I had a frank talk with the members, telling them why I chose to serve as advisor to this particular group. I told them a bit of my own history, the frequent "random" screenings at the airport, the fact that my renewed passport was late in coming even though my wife and I have submitted our renewal request at the same time. I told them how I can't really prove that my Arab name has anything to do with such incidents but that it seems more likely that it does than not.

I wouldn't say that things immediately turned around after that meeting but I think the challenges of social distancing, coupled with some space from the injustices of this past spring, helped to quell a lot of the resentment in the students' hearts. It allowed us to start the year on a new page at the very least.

The second thing I wanted was for the students to develop the ability to discuss complex topics in depth. SIDER went from being a grievance circle where students complained about what they think is unfair in school to a place where they could thoroughly explore issues that concerned them. The students led discussions on the history curriculum, the concept of whitewashing history, why all humans develop stereotypes, what are micro-aggressions and how do they operate.

Shifting away from finger pointing to exploring large and complex topics created some interesting effects. The number of students who participated in discussions increased dramatically. Many students, particularly the Caucasian ones, were previously afraid to express an opinion out of fear of saying the "wrong thing." Now students were willing to engage in a back-and-forth dialogue and even disagree a bit. The danger of disagreement was removed in these discussions, which allowed

> The truth was that the students' accusation of the school of being racist hurt, and a petty part of me wanted to hurt them back.

for students to explore different ideas. Such discussions allowed me to ask questions to help students clarify their thinking on the given topics. When we discussed micro-aggressions, for example, I asked the students whether they wanted the school to monitor or have punitive consequences for inappropriate messaging that occurs outside of school. Some students made a case for the school getting involved, while other students disagreed. Still, the disagreement was cordial and it focused on the issues discussed in a constructive way. SIDER has become a "safe space" to honestly discuss some topics in a way that many institutions currently seem to lack.

We also brought in speakers to discuss topics external to the school and its internal concerns. We had a Judge come in and speak about her experience as a Black female presiding in the Bronx criminal court. She discussed the challenge of recognizing the disparities in criminal sentencing and her commitment to following the law while still offering compassion to youthful offenders. The Judge graciously extended an invitation to students to observe criminal court proceedings virtually, which was an incredibly exciting opportunity. Another guest speaker was a reporter who spoke of his experience working as a Black man in the white-dominated field of journalism. More speakers are lined up for the rest of the year, including a state senator, an actor, and a female police officer who will speak about her experience protecting NYC during the George Floyd protests. Some of our students have taken advantage of these events to apply for internships with the speakers' organizations.

This year I have noticed a tremendous difference in how the SIDER students perceive the school. They are still frustrated with the pace at which they feel progress is happening, but they do not appear to be resentful. Where the tone last year was hostile, with students implying that some of their teachers are racist, they are now respectful and collaborative. They have skin in the game and they recognize that their actions are contributing positively to the community. There is a sense of optimism in the work they are doing.

It is difficult to overstate the positive impact that SIDER is having on the school, especially this year. Because of COVID, very few of the school's student organizations have been able to operate effectively. It took us a few months to get the ball rolling, but eventually SIDER was able to offer a collaborative discussion space for

students, which has been sorely lacking. SIDER offers the community an opportunity to operate as a community.

My approach to organizing this inclusivity and diversity student club is not without its detractors. The more activist-leaning members of the community feel that students should not have to bear the burden of changing the school culture; that burden, they believe, should rest upon the faculty. Several members of the SIDER board feel that there is still way too much focus on talk and not enough focus on action. But as Larry David once said, "A good compromise is when all parties are dissatisfied."

One of the wonderful things about a community is that people can hold different views and still be valued. I began this endeavor with significant discomfort about voicing even mild disagreements. Now I express myself without fear. It is clear to everyone that we all want what is best for the community even if we do not agree exactly what "best" means or how to get there. I still have concerns about sharing my thoughts with students because what they have in passion they lack in the ability to think through. But even if I annoy or even seriously upset some of the board members when I express my opinions, I am confident that I have built sufficient goodwill over the years as a teacher, advisor, and even occasionally as a fellow classmate who sits in on classes taught by my colleagues, that I can express my disagreement without lasting damage or loss of trust.

Looking back at my work with SIDER, I appreciate the opportunity that came about from stepping up to do work that I didn't want to do. My fear of confrontation and judgement, the proverbial dragon, was guarding a treasure trove that held inherent value for me, the freedom to express my worldview to my community without fear of reprisal. My work with SIDER has subtly changed my view of my work. While my main job is still to impart high school students with a greater scientific understanding of the world, my underlying motivation has changed to help students look at the world as objectively as they can, so that they can muster their resources to take responsibility for making the best changes that they can for their community. If I can help students embrace their own sense of agency and use that to make measurable changes in their own way, I will know that my time with them has been valuable.

Selim Tlili *taught in the NYC Department of Education for 11 years before joining the Rudolf Steiner School as a science and math teacher. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in biology from SUNY Geneseo, as well as a Master's in Public Health from Hunter College. He is currently working on a Master's in Liberal Arts degree, in English studies, through Harvard University's Extension School.*