

More than Taking Care: Literacies Research Within Legacies of Harm

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There is damage. There was always damage and there will be more damage, but not always. Were there always to be more damage, damage would be an aspect of perfection. We would all be angels, one-legged and faceless, seething with endless, hopeless praise.

—Adam Levin, *The Instructions*

These are painful times to learn and to teach. Literacies researchers must engage in our work with a commitment toward healing. Today, we must consider what it means to do our work in an era of #MeToo. Particularly considering the majority of teachers in the U.S. are women, how has our profession—and our role as researchers in bettering classroom life—addressed the traumas inflicted by witnessing the doubt of credibility of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's claims of sexual assault by now Supreme Court Justice, Brett Kavanaugh (Baker, 2018)? Such harmful events take place beyond classrooms but fundamentally affect how students, teachers, and researchers think, feel, and interact.

This past summer, Elizabeth Dutro and I wrote about the need for English educators to *elect* to heal in this moment of rising Trumpism and literal and symbolic violence directed towards members of historically marginalized communities (Garcia & Dutro, 2018). We wrote this article with the recognition that healing is too often overlooked as a central need in classrooms. We also wrote this article to intentionally acknowledge that student and teacher feelings are tied to the social world beyond the walls of schools; when Trump boasts of sexual assault or criminalizes an entire group of people, his words, actions, and policies *harm*. Finally, we wrote this article wrongly assuming that it would call back to the traumas students and teachers experienced in the past. We falsely assumed things would look rosier in the two years since Trump won the presidential election. It is clear that civic progress does not naturally shift toward the utopic. Rather, our responsibilities when it comes to caring and emotions require a constant civic *interrogation* if we are to continually situate the dignities of all youth in schools today (Mirra & Garcia, 2017).

The past two years have been exhausting for many and—for communities targeted by Trumpism—life-altering in traumatic ways. As literacies researchers, we must seek to make sense of policies and texts that actively seek to oppress and—in particularly vile circumstances—render individuals “out of existence” (Green, Benner, & Pear, 2018). More than content-related statements noted as SWBAT items on school boards and much more than state and district standards and learning objectives, fostering care and healing must be centered in the classrooms we work alongside, in our research methodologies, and in the kinds of research questions to which we attend.

While we are being harmed in myriad ways and particularly from specific sociopolitical actors, I want to specify that such harms are not purely located in the *present*. Rather, the language, policies, ideologies, and epistemologies that allow for harm across the sociopolitical spectrum have been fine-tuned for generations (Garcia & Philip, 2018). Within educational contexts, the violence experienced today stems from the same values that undergird school-tracking systems, attributions of differences in achievement to racial and socioeconomic “gaps,” and to an assumed color-blind envisioning of a culture of poverty against which schools must persist. Harm has been present for a long time. In light of the dialectical recognition that classrooms must attend to harm now *and* that harm is an ever-present force within a settler-colonial system of U.S. public education, I offer three considerations for contemporary literacies research.

We Must *Start* with the Damage Already Present

As Gurion Maccabee, the ten-year old protagonist of Adam Levin’s novel, *The Instructions*, notes in the epigraph to this essay, “there is always damage” within classrooms today. Though present day atrocities demand our attention and consideration, they do not arrive clandestinely from the ether. Restrictive policies, pushes against humanity, and efforts to subjugate others for the benefit of a primarily “white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy” (hooks, 1995, p. 25) are part of a legacy that critical scholarship, research, and pedagogy attend to for generations. Tuck’s (2009) call to “suspend damage” is a reminder of the *always-ness* of harm.

Literacies research and practice must begin from a recognition that harm has persisted long before we honed analytic tools for case studies or

ethnographies or community based research. While methods may respond to the contexts of classrooms, they have not historically functioned from a stance of “answerability” (Patel, 2016). Though there is no equivalent of a Hippocratic oath that researchers take before setting foot in spaces with vulnerable teachers and students, we must *do no harm* and actively address the “damage” that accumulates over time.

We Must Center Pedagogies and Methodologies around Sociocultural Contexts of Care

Building from the historical contexts of damage, we must—too—recognize that care is not bound by singular definitions. Despite psychological frameworks around social and emotional learning (SEL), care is also not solely centered within the body or mind of individuals (e.g., Ahmed, 2004). At the same time, we do not have a strong sociocultural grasp of what caring *means* for the myriad members of classroom learning environments.

As we attend to the literacy constructions of meaning-making in classrooms, we must question: how do teachers, students, and other members of classroom interactions interpret care and—importantly—what oversights and conflicts reside within the differences of these definitions? To be clear, care is culturally defined. We care in ways that adapt and shift over different times, spaces, and contexts and in ways that may not conform to psychology-driven frames like “mindfulness” or “grit.” In fact, such approaches—despite that they come from good intentions may, actually, be harmful. Conducting literacies research within learning environments means grounding how we attend to ongoing hurt and damage within methodologies that center healing and growth above all else.

We Must Build a Non-Damaging Future

Gurion’s words, again, remind us that though there has always *been* damage, it does “not always” have to persist. We cannot sit idly and hope for others to fix a historically harmful society; we possess agency to collectively engage in “future-making,” which Montfort (2017) defines as “the act of imagining a particular future and consciously trying to contribute to it” (p. 4). Specifically, classrooms can be sites of collaborative and critical future-making *if we design for them*. Likewise, literacies

research can be a collaborative and critical act of future-making *if we design for it*. Though the past and present are mired in damage we can be explicit in engaging in research and pedagogical practices that dream and design wildly for freedom from harm.

Beyond “Taking”

Frequently, we offer the phrase “take care” with little consideration for its implications. As if care is something that can be extracted and mined whole-cloth from *somewhere*, we issue a colonial command to “take” it. And yet, we must recognize the ecosystem in which care is developed collectively, built from the “inescapable network of mutuality” that Martin Luther King described (1968). Caring and healing—as imperative foundations for literacy research and pedagogy—must be understood as part of the spaces, materials, and interactions of our work. Too, they must be understood as in dialogue with the politics, histories, sociocultural identities, and epistemologies of those whose knowledge mediates learning and engagement. More than simply a resource for the taking, care is the bedrock for criticality and for liberatory-centered praxis.

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