



Bending Toward—or Away from—Racial Justice? Culturally-Responsive Curriculum Rollout at Arc Charter

Tatiana Geron and Meira Levinson

<https://www.justiceinschools.org>

Sophie Biel watched second-year teacher Ethan Frankel dismiss his eighth graders out of the social studies classroom. Ms. Biel was the instructional support specialist for Arc Charter Schools, a small Northeastern charter network. She was visiting Ethan’s classroom in Arc Coastal Middle School to coach him on implementing Arc’s new social studies curriculum. The culturally responsive curriculum, whose goal was to “portray diverse experience and perspectives in global and American history while challenging racial and cultural intolerance, injustice, and oppression,”¹ had already been successful with the teachers at Arc Downtown. But, Sophie thought to herself as Ethan approached her desk, grinning, she might have her work cut out for her at Arc Coastal.

“So, how do you think that went?” Sophie asked as Ethan sat down.

“I thought it was excellent!” Ethan beamed. “They were so engaged! They had so much to say about the connections between Jim Crow laws and our twenty-first-century legal system. This new curriculum is awesome, Ms. Biel.”

“Ok, so engagement was positive. I noticed you fed off the energy in the room, too,” Sophie responded, cringing inwardly as she recalled how Ethan had enthusiastically affirmed a student’s statement that White people shouldn’t become police officers. “Any deltas, or things you wish had gone differently?”

“Well,” Ethan ran a hand through his red curls. “Honestly, a couple of times I didn’t really know how to push the conversations in the right direction. I mean, this is why I wanted to teach social studies! Honest conversations about the problems in our country today! But I noticed that Kaeden and Emmalee, and some of the other, um, White kids?” He looked furtively at Sophie as he mentioned race, and then continued. “They weren’t participating as much. And, like, I’m not sure how much I can really say either, as a White male, right?”

“That unpacking privilege exercise you had us do at the last PD was really good, by the way,” Ethan added hastily. “But to tell the truth, it was the first time I’d thought about racism like that. I really want my students of color not to feel marginalized in *my* classroom, like you said. But am I oppressing them just by being in a position of authority?”

He looked at Sophie like she had all the answers. She took a deep breath, unsure where to start. Just then, the bell rang and Ethan jumped up. “I have to go supervise lunch today. Can we talk more about this in our next session? I’m really looking forward to it.”

Sophie nodded, and Ethan bounded out. She admired Ethan’s willingness to tackle the difficult topic of structural racism in his classroom and was grateful for his burgeoning self-awareness. But the fact of the matter was that the lesson had been extremely difficult to watch. Ethan had gone off script very early, encouraging his students to share their experiences with the criminal justice system without setting up discussion norms or boundaries. Despite their previous coaching, his facilitation still lacked nuanced

¹ Teel, Karen Manheim., and Obidah, Jennifer E. *Building Racial and Cultural Competence in the Classroom: Strategies from Urban Educators*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2008.

understanding. Sophie was worried that Ethan's teaching was simplifying students' views on race and the justice system, not rendering them more complex as the curriculum intended.

Sophie had taken the position of instructional support specialist after nine years teaching English language arts at Arc Downtown, the flagship of the network's five schools. Originally drawn to teach in an urban charter to fight for social justice, the past nine years had taught her just how complicated that fight was. A queer, White woman who grew up working class, Sophie was constantly thinking about the intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality marginalization, and how it manifested itself in the school system. At Arc Downtown she'd found a team of similar-minded educators who pushed each other's thinking and engaged in activism together. Sophie hadn't wanted to leave the classroom, but when she and her wife adopted their daughter, she'd decided to take a more flexibly-scheduled position that allowed her to work with schools across the network.

She'd been thrilled to learn that her first project was to revamp the Arc social studies curriculum, an endeavor she and her Downtown colleagues had been pushing for years. Though she would never claim to be an expert on racial justice, she felt her greatest strength was to listen to and learn from others' experiences—and she'd seen her share of what worked and what didn't when having difficult conversations with students. After four months developing the curriculum at her former school, Sophie was continuing the process with Coastal with a full-day training followed by twice-monthly observations and check-ins. Her goal was then to roll it out in Arc's other three schools the following semester, although that would be up to the central administration, contingent on the successful pilot at Coastal.

Sophie's two days a month at Coastal were jam-packed with department meetings and observations; today, her fifth visit, was no different. But as her heels clicked down the hallway on her way to her next meeting, Sophie pondered for the umpteenth time how different Coastal was from Downtown. While Downtown served a mixed-income group of students of color, Coastal's student body mirrored the predominantly White and working-class demographics of its small, former port city. At Downtown, the curriculum change had been catalyzed by veteran teachers who created their own units that addressed issues of race and power in history. Sophie was concerned that her team had underestimated what it meant to put a social justice curriculum in the hands of the mostly White and younger teachers at Coastal, many of whom had never considered the need for such a curriculum.

She knocked on Tiana Shepard's classroom door, and the seventh-grade social studies teacher opened it with a smile. Tiana had taught at Downtown for six years before shifting to Coastal last year. Having worked together to develop the new curriculum, both women were proud of the work that Tiana's students were doing with the unit on early colonial history. "I was hoping you'd help me look through some student work," she said. "I've been having the kids write journal pieces for homework. Some of them already know more than I do about the massacres and enslavement of the Taino following Columbus' arrival on Hispaniola. Other kids have grown up being force-fed the old story, though. I'm having trouble meeting all the kids where they're at."

Tiana held up one piece of notebook paper for Sophie to see. "Tyler, for example. This kid is a sweetheart, and he's really taking this new curriculum to heart. He wrote, *Today I learned that Columbus forced Taino to work themselves to death in the gold mines. I used to think that he was a hero, and now I'm not sure what to think. Does this mean that other people who I think are heroes will end up being the villain, too? What about me—am I a villain for thinking he was so great? Is everything I've learned in school a lie?!*"

Sophie smiled at the seventh-grader's dramatic phrasing, but Tiana continued. "And, to make things more complicated, I got an email from his mom this morning. She was concerned after Tyler spent all dinner talking about the atrocities European explorers committed in the New World. I think her exact

words were, *Are you teaching him to hate himself because he's Italian? Are you teaching hatred of White people?*"

Tiana sighed. "I'm not here for this White fragility thing, Sophie. Obviously, I care about my students, but I care about them learning the *truth*. And when I was growing up, did any of my White teachers care that they were teaching history that made us Black kids feel uncomfortable and upset? No way. Our world is changing, and besides, this"—she gestured to the "Columbus—Hero or Villain?" sign she'd tacked on her bulletin board—"This is the truth. It's our duty as teachers to disrupt the cycle of power. I've dealt with this kind of thing before, here, so I'm ok talking to Tyler's mom about celebrating different perspectives and empowering each other to do good in the world, so on and so forth. But she cc'd Principal Barry on that email."

Sophie groaned.

"You might want to report this to the higher-ups at Arc," Tiana said. "They need to know that some real parental pushback is possible."

"You're right," Sophie agreed. "But I don't know how much backup you're going to get. I don't think they really understand what the curriculum is about—and I'm worried this could make the rollout harder to the rest of the network." As Tiana's face fell, Sophie hastened to change the mood. "But that's not on you! You're doing such great work. I just have to figure out how to sell it to the central office."

Tiana smiled. "This is the revolution, right? We'll keep fighting the good fight. Even if it takes up our whole lunch break."

Sophie's last consultation of the day was with Lucy Cross, the sixth-grade social studies teacher. Lucy was in her fourth year teaching and had grown up in the same town as Coastal, but beyond those basic facts, Sophie didn't know her very well. When she knocked on Lucy's door, Lucy was grading papers at her desk and looked surprised to see Sophie.

"Oh, hi!" Lucy smiled and gave Sophie an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, I completely forgot we were meeting today."

"Is now still a good time?" asked Sophie.

"Sure, I have a few minutes." Lucy pulled a chair for Sophie up to her desk. "To be honest, though, I'm not sure how much we have to meet about, and I don't want to waste your time."

"Don't worry, you're on my schedule," Sophie tried to reassure her. "How did the south-up map lesson² go today?"

"Oh, well, I didn't do that lesson. It's an interesting idea, but I need to teach my students the *right* way to read a global map. That's hard enough, and the south-up map will just be confusing to them. I decided to

² McArthur's "Universal Corrective Map of the World" up-ends, literally, European cartographers' placement of the Northern Hemisphere at the top of the world map. Some scholars argue that the choice to situate Europe and North America at the top and center of the map has psychological and political consequences, including seeing the south as subordinate to the north and Europe and North America as having outsized importance. See Nick Danforth (2014), "How the north ended up on top of the map," *Al Jazeera America*, February 16, 2014. De Armendi, Nicole (2009), "[The Map as Political Agent: Destabilising the North-South Model and Redefining Identity in Twentieth-Century Latin American Art](#)", *St Andrews Journal of Art History and Museum Studies*: 5–1.

focus on teaching the core concept really well this week. In past years this has built a great foundation for the rest of our year.”

Sophie was taken aback. Lucy was still smiling, with no indication that she meant to be combative, but Sophie felt her own hackles raise. “But that’s exactly the rationale behind this lesson—that students deserve a different perspective on geography than what has traditionally been considered ‘the correct way’ to view a globe. Particularly with many of our students’ families coming from countries that were dominated by Northern groups—many teachers have found that this kind of lesson engages them in the geography curriculum in a new way.”

“Yeah, but shouldn’t that wait until after the state test? I’m sure *you* get it,” Lucy leaned in towards Sophie. “If I have to choose between teaching a lesson that’s rigorous, and teaching one that’s culturally responsive, I’m going to choose rigorous, right? Don’t get me wrong, I think it’s good for some teachers to roll out this new curriculum, but not for me.”

“Um,” Sophie began, but Lucy barreled on.

“Also, talking about race when I’m trying to teach geography is confusing. It distracts the students from the core curriculum; they get so riled up! I’m just sorry you have to be put in the middle of it,” Lucy said sympathetically. “It’s got to be tough having to be the advocate for this.”

“It’s not tough for me. I really believe in this curriculum—for all kids.” *She thinks I agree with her because I look like her*, Sophie realized. But Lucy was already backtracking.

“No, of course—I believe in all the kids, too. That’s why I want to stay focused on the important stuff. Besides, we have our international potluck coming up, and that’s always a great way to celebrate Coastal’s diversity,” Lucy grinned as she ushered Sophie out of her classroom.

Sophie walked towards the Teachers’ Lounge, feeling disoriented. She knew introducing the curriculum would be bumpy, but she hadn’t anticipated that three months in, she would still be encountering so many different challenges. How on earth, she wondered, was she going to manage the rollout to three more schools?

Raised voices down the hallway caught her attention, and she watched Ethan Frankel’s classroom door spring open. Two girls rushed out, one White, one Black. Ethan followed, looking bewildered.

“Make her take it back!”

“You know it’s true!”

“My dad’s a cop! Take it back!”

Ethan had to block the two from getting physical. Sophie quickened her pace. Principal Barry appeared at the other end of the hall first. “Ladies? Mr. Frankel? Why are we yelling in the hallway?”

“She’s saying my dad is racist! My dad isn’t racist! You’re racist for saying that!”

“You can’t call me racist! What’s wrong with you?”

“Ladies! Mr. Frankel, go back in the classroom and write me a report, I’ll take care of this. Ladies, come with me. Nia,” he turned to the Black student. “This is the second time you’ll be in my office this week! That’s grounds for suspension. Let’s go.”

Sophie's heart was still pounding as she entered the teacher's lounge. With relief, she saw her close friend and former Downtown colleague, David Garcia, standing at the microwave. "Soph! How's the day going?" he greeted her with a fist bump.

"I just spent fifteen minutes helping Ethan Frankel reset his class." Voice shaking, Sophie explained what happened in the hallway.

David shook his head "Unfortunately, I'm not surprised. Brandon's dad told me last week he was *not* happy that his son was being taught about racism by 'some White kid who can go home with his privilege when school gets out,' while Brandon's got to think about this every day of his life."³

"Do you think the curriculum could be hurting kids, students of color especially, more than it helps?" Sophie thought of Principal Barry threatening Nia with suspension and shuddered. "The power dynamics here are so difficult. I've also got teachers who think teaching race is a distraction and parents who worry that the curriculum is teaching their White children to hate themselves for being White. Central office could hear this and pull their support—not only here, but for the whole network. You know how they value curricular coherence across their schools. Downtown would be devastated."

David looked pensive. "You're doing a good job, Soph, but I wonder— I can't believe I'm saying this, but I wonder if Arc's ready for a curriculum that actually takes a hard look at race. I'm one of what, four adults of color who work at Coastal full-time? And I spent my days telling students to walk silently in the halls and nod no matter what the teacher is saying. Not exactly liberation pedagogy. If Arc isn't even challenging the status quo in how we hire teachers or set school culture, why should we think that teachers can do it in their classrooms with students?"

"I don't know, though," David abruptly reversed himself, "as King said, we can't keep waiting. 'Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor'—and this curriculum isn't going to start teaching itself."

As David hurried out to meet his next class, Sophie felt her stomach clench. Implementing this curriculum was a moral imperative, she was sure. In fact, the challenges of carrying it out at Arc Coastal seemed to make it even more necessary. But thinking of Ethan's capacity and Lucy's perspective, the parental pushback, and the hallway fight, it was impossible to ignore the real harm that students could experience if the curriculum were taught badly. Could she continue to defend the curriculum implementation at Coastal—let alone the rollout across the network—given what she had seen?

³ Katie Lemke and Anya Rosenberg, "Case Final" (unpublished case, 2017).

To cite this case study:

Geron, T., & Levinson, M. (2019). Bending Toward—or Away From—Racial Justice? Culturally Responsive Curriculum Rollout at Arc Charter. In M. Levinson & J. Fay (Eds.), *Democratic Discord in Schools: Cases and Commentaries in Educational Ethics* (209-214). Harvard Education Press.

Copyright statement:

This case was published in *Democratic Discord in Schools: Cases and Commentaries in Educational Ethics*, Edited by Meira Levinson and Jacob Fay. Copyright (c) 2019 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved.

The case has been reprinted with permission of Harvard Education Press for personal use only. Any other use, print or electronic, will require written permission. For more information, please visit <https://hep.gse.harvard.edu> or email to hepg@harvard.edu.