



Course Correction: Teaching Critical Consciousness in an Anti-CRT State

READERS THEATER

Yonas Michael, Sara O'Brien, and Nicolas Tanchuk

Script Adaptation by Meira Levinson

<https://justiceinschools.org>

Cast: Narrator, Sally, Daniel, Gabby, Brian, Mrs. Peterson, Nicky, Reggie

Narrator: Heath Middle School Principal Daniel Semere smiled sadly at Sally Bruce, a White teacher with two decades of experience who had just told him she was leaving Heath to teach at the local university.

Sally taught a three-week elective for sixth graders called Critical Consciousness, which she and Daniel had co-developed using Learning for Justice standards anchored to the state Social Studies and Language Arts standards. The course was designed to help students *think critically* about how power and privilege systematically advantage some while disadvantaging others, and *take action* to redress inequities. Although fairly new, the course was a game-changer for students marginalized by race and gender, as the school's recent climate survey showed.

Now its future was in doubt, and not just because of Sally's impending departure. All year, irate parents had been filing complaints against the licenses of any teachers they believed were filling students' heads with "anti-American beliefs." Sally had already received one complaint, which she jokingly called her "badge of honor."

As a Black man who had been born in a refugee camp in Sudan and immigrated to the United States as a child, Daniel had a personal and professional stake in creating racially inclusive schools. He'd come to the district specifically at the invitation of the previous superintendent to help make equity a reality in Heath.

But the superintendent had resigned from her position just weeks before in response to parental pressure equating equity with "indoctrination." The new interim superintendent told Daniel that the district was putting equity work on hold in light of the complaints. Now Daniel found himself as the only Black administrator in Heath, trying to decide how much he was willing to risk to continue the work with reduced district support.

To make matters worse, the governor had just signed a new law, which forbade schools from teaching that "the United States and the state of Iowa are fundamentally or

systemically racist or sexist”—a clause that many teachers and parents alike interpreted as banning any teaching about institutional racism or White supremacy. The law also outlawed teaching students to feel “discomfort [...] on account of [their] race or sex”—a difficult feeling to avoid in a course about power, privilege, and systematic advantage and disadvantage.

While it was unclear just how the law would be enforced, many teachers in the district worried that any discussion of race or gender in their courses would leave them vulnerable to complaints—or even legal repercussions. And the Critical Consciousness course had already been flagged as a “matter of concern” on one parent group’s website. With Sally leaving, the course’s future was more uncertain than ever.

Daniel: “Congratulations! State U couldn’t find a better person to work with new teachers.”

Sally: “Thanks. I’m excited, though of course I’m heartbroken, too. I just hate leaving the kids. I brought you some of their work. It’s the identity reflection the students do in the third week of the course. This student wrote about how they never felt school was a welcoming place for queer kids before. They literally wrote: ‘This course saved my life.’”

Narrator: Daniel knew that the course was making a difference—in the recent climate survey, they’d seen a 27% increase in students’ perceived physical and psychological safety compared to the year before the course ran. But seeing the student’s words in their own handwriting struck him deeply. Could he eliminate a course that was having such a positive impact on the students who most needed to feel supported? But given the backlash and the new law, would he actually be able to keep the course in its current form?

Daniel: “Thanks for bringing this. We’re really going to miss you.”

Narrator: Later that morning, two teachers approached Daniel in the staff room. Gabby was a veteran Language Arts teacher in her twentieth year at HMS, and one of the only other Black educators at the school. Brian was a White social studies teacher. The two frequently collaborated.

Gabby: “Sally told us about the job at State. Who are you getting to take over her class?”

Daniel [laughing]: “Direct as always, Gabby. I wish I knew the answer to that.”

Gabby: “They’ll be in for a rough ride. But we spent years trying to get something like that course off the ground. Just because it’s ruffling some feathers doesn’t mean we should abandon it now.”

Daniel: “I don’t mind ruffling feathers. But this new law is a serious blow.”

Brian: “It’s downright scary! Honestly, the Critical Consciousness class might be doomed under the law. I’ve already been wondering what changes I might need to make to my courses. Everything is grounded in the state standards, of course, but will that be enough to keep us from being challenged?”

Gabby: “We shouldn’t make *any* changes. What we’re doing is good for kids.”

Brian: “But teachers are already getting in trouble, and the new law hasn’t even taken effect. I know that the complaint against Sally’s license didn’t influence her decision, but many of us can’t take that kind of risk.”

Daniel: “I wouldn’t ask you to, Brian. Truthfully, I’m not sure whether I can ask anyone to take this on. I don’t want to lose any teachers doing this work.”

Gabby: “But I don’t want our kids losing the chance to talk about the systemic challenges that they’re facing every day. They’re living with all these injustices—racism, sexism, homophobia—on social media, on TV, even in the hallways here! They need help unpacking all that and finding ways to make change.”

Brian: “Is this one course the only way to do that? What if we spread those conversations and projects out into other courses?”

Daniel: “I know you both would include more social justice curriculum in a heartbeat. But would the curriculum have the same impact if we dilute it that way?”

Gabby: “And could we be sure everyone would actually teach it? If even *you* are thinking of changing your teaching, Brian, think about how our colleagues feel. Many of them won’t be willing to get near anything that smacks of social justice. Oops, there’s the bell – time for class!”

Narrator: Daniel returned to his office to find several insistent phone messages from Mrs. Peterson, the parent of a sixth grader named Carly who had opted into Critical Consciousness so she could be in the same class as her friends. Mrs. Peterson had grudgingly approved the elective, but Daniel could tell she was having second thoughts. Sighing, Daniel dialed her number.

Daniel: “Mrs. Peterson, how are you?”

Mrs. Peterson: “I’m angry, Mr. Semere, that’s how I am. I’m wondering why my family is being demonized at your school. Carly came home yesterday to tell me that Christians like us have persecuted homosexuals for centuries. She said that her teacher called the legalization of gay marriage a victory.”

Daniel: “In the long struggle for gay rights, it *is* a huge legal victory.”

Mrs. Peterson: “Well, to a lot of people it’s a perversion. Scripture tells us that marriage exists between a man and a woman. There’s no law that’s higher than Scripture.”

Daniel: “Many people disagree with that, and the Critical Consciousness course exists to introduce students to new perspectives.”

Mrs. Peterson: “That’s the problem! You’ve preached to me before about different perspectives, but you know whose perspective is missing from that class? Mine! If you’re going to teach my daughter about the morality of gay marriage, she deserves to hear both sides of the argument. But she’s not seeing anything that promotes good Christian values. She’s reading gay propaganda instead! If you really believe in different perspectives, then put some Christian authors into the syllabus.”

Daniel: “Mrs. Peterson, you have a right to your beliefs. But I won’t include readings that devalue LGBTQ students and families.”

Mrs. Peterson: “But you have no problem ‘devaluing’ Carly and her religion? You’re a hypocrite, that’s all you are. And I’m going to make sure that no child ever has to sit through your course again. You won’t be indoctrinating kids for much longer. Goodbye, Mr, Semere!”

Narrator: Daniel leaned his head back against the chair. It wasn’t the first time he’d been threatened by a parent, and he doubted it would be the last. Would she be filing a complaint against his license? Was the threat more serious? Would he do anything different even if it was? As he was pondering these questions, two Black sixth grade boys suddenly appeared in his doorway, looking outraged.

Daniel: “Nicky! Reggie! How can I help you?”

Nicky: “Mr. Semere, it isn’t right. Ms. Hopkins used the n-word in front of the whole class during 7th period!”

Narrator: Daniel sighed. Janie Hopkins was a White teacher who had only been teaching for two years. Though she was well-meaning, she had a lot to learn about the nuances of culturally responsive teaching. He hadn’t had reports of her using that kind of language previously, though he’d heard similar complaints about other teachers.

Reggie: “We were reading the textbook, and she was trying to explain what ‘derogatory’ means.”

Nicky: “And then she used it as an example! Just said it, out loud, right in front of us! And then she just kept talking, like it was no big deal! So I told her, ‘You can’t say that, Ms. Hopkins.’ And she said she didn’t do anything wrong—she was just giving an example! And then Reggie...you tell him, Reggie.”

Reggie: “So I raised my hand and I told her that was a microaggression, and Nicky and I and the other Black kids in the class shouldn’t have to hear that word.”

Nicky (*sounding proud*): “We just learned about microaggressions with Ms. Bruce.”

Reggie (*sounding shaken and upset*): “So she made me stay after class because she said I was being disrespectful. But *she* was being disrespectful, Mr. Semere.”

Nicky: “So I stayed with Reggie. And we stayed there for 20 minutes and she wouldn’t admit she did anything wrong.”

Daniel: “I’m sorry, boys.”

Nicky: “You’ve got nothing to be sorry about, Mr. Semere. It’s Ms. Hopkins who should be sorry, but she’s not. She’s the one who should be taking Ms. Bruce’s class—why are me and Reggie stuck explaining racism to her?”

Narrator: Daniel had no good answer. The boys already knew that they lived in an unjust world—they didn’t need Daniel to tell them that. For now they needed a sounding board, and not for the first time, Daniel was grateful that he could help Black kids at HMS in this way. Grateful and tired.

Daniel: “It’s getting late. You should be going home. I’ll take it from here.”

Narrator: As the boys left, Daniel added a conversation with Ms. Hopkins to his mental to-do list for tomorrow. And again he came back to the Critical Consciousness course, which had clearly resonated with both Nicky and Reggie—further proof of its positive impact.

Daniel: Doesn’t that positive impact make the course worth fighting for? But can I really ask another teacher to take it on, given the possibility of losing their license? And what about the risks *I’d* be taking on? If I lose my license, who will support kids like Reggie and Nicky? But how much can I realistically do with diminished district support? Would I be better off finding another district—or another state—where I could do this work unchallenged? What should my next step be?