

As a white conventionally-abled Diverse Learning instructor in CPS, my students and peers reflected races, abilities, ages and stories different from mine. Teaching mostly Black and Latinx students of varied abilities, I interrogated my privilege daily and actively sought anti-racist models of instruction. For my classroom to flourish and work against the perpetuation of white supremacy in education, it was essential to develop a pedagogy of celebrating difference and giving real power to students.

In my experience teaching in varied south and west side schools, white supremacy flourishes in the choice of curriculum, testing, staffing, leadership, behavioral norms and exclusionary discipline. Systemic racism in educational structures teach implicitly and explicitly that the experience of Black, brown, and differently abled youth are not valued or reflected in the classroom or institutions of higher learning. A theater classroom in which curriculum is built on students telling and shaping their own stories, hearing those stories reflected by their peers, and performing those stories for the broader community actively pushes against these racist norms. As a theater maker, it was and is clear to me that arts education can uniquely empower diverse intelligences and cultural backgrounds in the act of collaborative storytelling and creation.

Considering my multiple intersections of privilege, I pushed for culturally responsive pedagogy in my classroom and school. As a queer cisgender woman I reflected on liberating educational environments I had experienced and sought out radical facilitation training through Young Chicago Authors and the Center for Civic Practice. Through a year of meeting with groups of students, applying for grants, and advocating with administration, I created a theater position at my school in West Humboldt Park. I developed the theater program around devising as an anti-racist and anti-ableist vehicle for student voice.

In the devising based classroom, ageism, racism, and ableism must be cast aside as we rely on varied and unexpected forms of intelligence to move us towards our final goal of performing an original script. Pieces my students have created range from a site-specific travelling version of Krampus to a piece called “Walls”, investigating the intersection between the Israeli-Palestinian border, the proposed US-Mexico border wall, and the walls of jails and prisons that rob years from Black and brown youth. The characteristics of the play and performance depended entirely on the group of students and their collective interest and imagination.

Through further coaching from Ryan Keesling of Free Write Arts & Literacy and Jessica Beasley, Superintendent at Lighthouse Schools in Indiana, a colleague and I petitioned Piccolo School of Excellence to create a team for anti-racist professional development for their staff. As a member of this team I researched and co-facilitated professional development to a team of 32 diverse adult staff members. I was then invited to speak at Ingenuity’s Arts Education Conference in 2019 on Devising in the Middle School Classroom as a trauma-responsive anti-racist pedagogy. Through these engagements with adult learners I centered other voices and created platforms for discussion. Working with my peers utilized the same set of skills needed to bring student creativity and voice into the devising classroom while de-centering my own perspective.

In my work at the Chicago Children's Theatre I have been part of discussions about how what is staged can better reflect the identities of our city's youth. Seeking plays that are not heteronormative and white-centering while creating appropriate materials for rich follow up in classrooms has been central to my work. In my training with Willa Taylor at the Goodman, I have learned about immersive models of Theatre for Young Audiences that go beyond what is staged. Backyard Chicago modeled much of its intergenerational devising on work at the Goodman Theatre and Julian Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed intensives.

Co-creation and meaningful structure making in the arts grows out of collaboration across many spectrums of difference. Engaging students in learning through radical arts pedagogy would create an opportunity to do the work of integrating anti-racism and non-hierarchy in our approach to theater, changing the landscape of theater as we know it. As the world currently seeks imaginative alternatives to the power structures that have plagued and exploited us, theater education has a part to play in building community, leadership and vision for a truly democratic future.

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At DePaul, the range of student backgrounds creates fertile ground for anti-racist learning, particularly in theater education. Co-creation and meaningful structure making in the arts grows out of collaboration across many spectrums of difference. Engaging DePaul students in learning through radical arts pedagogy would create an opportunity to do the work of integrating anti-racism and non-hierarchy in our approach to theater, changing the landscape of theater as we know it. As the world currently seeks imaginative alternatives to the power structures that have plagued and exploited us, theater education has a part to play in building community, leadership and vision for a truly democratic future.