



# CRAFTING A CURRICULUM THAT WORKS FOR *your* STUDENTS

BY CORNELIUS MINOR

I LOOKED AT THE SMILING CHILDREN ON THE FRONT OF THE BOOK. “LOOK AGAIN,” SHE COMMANDED.

**M**rs. Davenport is one of those teachers that everybody listens to. She’s earned it. I’ve met parents on “Back to School” night who remember when she taught them. They come, shutting their children, the reverence from their days with her a generation ago still etched on their faces.

This is the same reverence etched on mine. She is authority and poise and intellect and high expectations personified. She is the living embodiment of “the teacher look”—the one that communicates love, inspires awe, and compels you to listen.

Technically, I’m her coach, but she spends her days *schooling* me. I hear every word.

“Look. Again. Cornelius.” She enunciates every consonant sound in my name. As per usual, Mrs. Davenport did not come here to play.

I look. The smiling kids on the front of the curriculum guide have not moved. I do not know what she wants me to see. I do not tell her this. But my expression does.

She caresses my arm. Immediately I am at ease, but I am not off the hook. At all.

# “THESE ARE NOT OUR CHILDREN,” SHE STARTS.

All of a sudden, I see what she wanted me to see. Of the faces smiling at me, none of them were Latinx like our students. As far as we could tell, none of them seemed to be from Hungary or from China like our students. None

of them appeared to be West Indian like our students. The lone African American student on the cover wore the uncomfortable expression of someone held against his will. In the scene depicted on the front of the book, his white classmates did not even notice. It was tragic. And comedic.

Mrs. Davenport spoke. “This book was given to us, but it was not written for us.” This was not an observation. It was a verdict.

“Those people from the district plan for everything, Cornelius. You work with them sometimes. You know this?”

I blinked—hard—in acknowledgment of this.

“It is very clear, even from the cover, young man, that they have not planned for us. So we are going to plan for us. We are going to take what they did, and build on it.”

Mrs. Davenport was not asking. She was not sending an email for “permission to alter the curriculum” to the department or to the principal. And she certainly was not asking it of me. She was declaring. It was terrifyingly liberating.

Mrs. Davenport knew what I have come to value immensely. Any curriculum designed without her specific students in mind is not a curriculum that she is willing to use. I’ve grown to understand that this refusal is *not* an outright rejection of standard curriculum or the authority that wields it; rather, it is a blanket admission that any curriculum or “program” that we buy, adopt, or create is incomplete until it includes our students and until it includes us.

Mrs. Davenport and the countless teachers like her have helped me to understand that my job as a teacher is not to “teach the curriculum” or even to just “teach the students”; it is to seek to understand my kids as completely as possible so that I can purposefully bend curriculum to meet them.

What we choose to teach can do great harm to children if we are not careful. Harmful curriculum is any curriculum that:

- does not see students or the very specific lives that they lead
- is not flexible enough to be altered by the teachers who seek to use it
- does not educate or grow the practitioner.



Essentially, any curriculum that does not see my students cannot possibly be good for them. Any curriculum that is not flexible or malleable is not good for me. Any curriculum that does not teach me does not really aim to teach them.

I’ve realized that curriculum does not come out of the box like this. No curriculum—no matter how good—is ever going to see my kids. Not all programs want to help me be a better practitioner. Many just want to tell me what to do. It is up to me to make my curriculum fit the needs of my students.

When the curriculum itself feels like it is the enemy, one way to eliminate this curricular hostility is to confront it—as Mrs. Davenport did—with your students in your heart and a pen in your hand.

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## MY JOB AS A TEACHER IS TO SEEK TO UNDERSTAND MY KIDS AS COMPLETELY AS POSSIBLE SO THAT I CAN PURPOSEFULLY BEND CURRICULUM TO MEET THEM.

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Much has been written about what it means to make a curriculum that works for our kids. How do we even define who our kids are? And what does it mean that a curriculum works for them?

Where do I even start? For me the answer has been “not from scratch.”

Crafting and sustaining an inclusive approach and pairing that with academic content takes insight and time and research and resources that I don’t always have. Even if I had the resources to do so in a powerful way, spending my emotional and intellectual energy being fully present with kids would be a much smarter investment than spending that same energy simply preparing for them.

This does not mean that I eschew planning. This simply means that I’m smart about how I use my time.

I read the curriculum that I’ve been given or assigned or I start with a research base—someone else’s. I look at research-based approaches that have been successful in other schools or classes,

and I read what those schools and teachers did and how they did it. I consider the professional books that they read and the materials that they used or purchased.

Basically, I start where the people before me left off by learning as much as I can about my content and about what I am expected to do, what has been given to me, and what has worked in the past. This forms the foundation of my work by essentially giving me an original work to remix. I build on this foundation by getting to know my kids.

Before I know what to teach, I need to know whom I teach.

I’ve found that it’s easy to take intellectual shortcuts when it comes to getting to know students. We’ve all met the kid who lives to please the teacher or the kid who exists to elude us. We’ve met the kids who do all of the things on time, and we’ve met the kids who don’t seem to notice that there are things to be done. We seem to have these kids every year. With all of the work that we have to do each year—especially in the beginning when we are getting to know students—it can feel convenient to treat Jasmine, this year’s teacher-pleaser, just like last year’s teacher-pleaser, Rosa.

Such a stance is potentially dangerous because it erases kids and reduces them to a caricature or stereotype. In this paradigm, Jasmine never gets to be. She is silenced—stripped of identity—simply because she is seen as a variation of Rosa. Children can rarely ever name that this is happening to them, but they often feel it. And they definitely respond to it. This silencing and erasure happens disproportionately to children with disabilities and children of color.

Stereotypes abound in our work. We’ve all heard about the angry, poverty-stricken student and the lone charismatic teacher that helped him to achieve. Those tropes make for engaging cinema, but they make for horrible curriculum.

When I engage with the stereotypes of kids that I’ve been handed or with the caricatures that I’ve constructed, many kids will still respond positively. But this is a false positivity. It occurs largely because I am the teacher, and as such, I hold all of the power. An interaction based on a power imbalance—the powerful interacting with the powerless—is not a positive interaction; it is a colonizing one. We end up giving kids the things we think they need, not the things that will sustain their futures. No matter how well intentioned we are when we do this, it is not teaching.

When I engage with the actual children in my class, this relationship forms the foundation for a curriculum that moves kids.

In relationships, it is the *process* of knowing that makes the dynamic powerful. What counts in any relationship is that the involved parties continue to invest in each other. In this regard, understanding or knowing our students is not something that we *achieve*. It is something that we *live*. Continually.



# BEFORE I KNOW WHAT TO TEACH, I NEED TO KNOW WHOM I TEACH.



After studying the content itself, and beginning the labor to know the children that I want to serve, I typically end my work by making articulated and visible connections from the content to the kids' lived experiences and to their aspirations.

There was a time in my career when I felt like making those connections was magical. There were certain teachers on my team who were just perpetually hip. I, on the other hand, exhibited only periodic flashes of cool. I spent years searching for the magic.

On that quest I learned a few things:

- There is no magic. Knowing what kids care about and acting upon that knowledge can be learned.
- Classroom cool is not performative. It is relational. Most of this work happens when you are not “onstage.”
- Many times we seek to foster a sense of “compliance” or one of “accountability.” Those things are based on us being powerful and kids being comparatively powerless. We can work instead to build trust. For kids, it's a more powerful place from which to learn.

Laboring to know children and using our most audacious creativity to act on that knowledge leaves us with a curriculum that authentically seeks to teach and not just to instruct or to control. Additionally, an approach to curriculum that labors to see and to know kids for who they are and then acts on that knowing helps to grow us into sharper professionals. It broadens the concept of assessment to include not just knowing what people can do, but knowing the people. It deepens our

knowledge of content by helping us to become more flexible practitioners of what we teach, and it keeps the focus of our work on transference by ensuring that the things that we teach can be used by children to impact life beyond our classrooms.

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*Adapted from Cornelius Minor's new book, **We Got This: Equity, Access, and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be** (Heinemann, 2018).*



**Cornelius Minor** is a frequent keynote speaker and Lead Staff Developer at the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. In that capacity, he works with teachers, school leaders, and leaders of community-based organizations to support deep and wide literacy reform in cities (and sometimes villages) across the globe.

Whether working with teachers and young people in Singapore, Seattle, or New York City, Cornelius always uses his love for technology, hip-hop, and social media to recruit students' engagement in reading and writing and teachers' engagement in communities of practice. As a staff developer and author, Cornelius draws not only on his years teaching middle school in the Bronx and Brooklyn, but also on time spent skateboarding, shooting hoops, and working with young people.