

REBECCA BELLINGHAM & VERONICA SCOTT

THE ARTFUL APPROACH TO  
EXPLORING  
IDENTITY  
AND FOSTERING  
BELONGING



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# THE ARTFUL APPROACH TO EXPLORING IDENTITY AND FOSTERING BELONGING

The background of the cover features several large, overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes. These include a large orange triangle pointing upwards, a blue triangle pointing downwards to the right, a pink triangle pointing downwards to the left, a teal triangle pointing upwards to the left, and a red heart shape at the bottom center. The shapes are layered, creating a sense of depth and movement.

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## INTRODUCTION

*For the poets, dreamers, visionaries, and risk takers  
who planted light in the field of darkness so we  
could rise up.*

—Joy Harjo, “Perhaps the World Ends Here”

**W**ithout fail, whenever we are knee-deep in planning mode, whether we’re working on a poetry workshop for teachers or an artist studio for second graders, there’s this inevitable moment of doubt that arises and we realize we’re both thinking the same unhelpful thing: Is this going to be enough? Will another one of these projects even make a difference? As lifelong educators, there’s nothing we want more than to offer something of value, something practical and inspiring, something hopeful to lift up the teachers or students we’re supporting. But as much as we try to hold on to that hope, especially on days when the headlines are particularly horrifying or when communities seems even more divided than usual, the world’s *capital-P* Problems keep pushing their way into our optimistic lesson plans. For every creative light bulb that goes off, there’s a parenthetical “what about” lurking in its shadow: Maybe we can write a community poem! *But what about the literacy crisis?* Maybe we can paint a neighborhood mural. *But what about basic needs?* Maybe we can take time to reflect as a team. *But what about teacher burnout?* Maybe we can bring our school together with a song! *But what about the upcoming election?* Maybe we can have a dance party to celebrate Women’s History Month! *But what about pay inequity? And the growing threat against women’s rights?* Before we know it, we’re headed for a what-about downward spiral.

Maybe you’ve been there. Maybe you’ve had a similar experience or train of thought: If we can’t solve the big stuff, then what’s the point of all these smaller efforts? And the truth is, a community poem is not going to fix our broken world. But where would we be, if in our toughest times, we didn’t have songs to turn to? Movies to transport us? Poems to unite us? We only have to look back at some of the most pivotal moments in

recent history to notice a link between movements and music, or art and activism, or literature and enlightenment. As Amanda Gorman (2021) says, “Poetry and language are often at the heartbeat of movements for change.” The arts empower people to rise up. They make space for the harmonious and the discordant. They offer us moments of beauty and joy in the midst of turmoil and glimpses of hope in the midst of uncertainty. They can help us share who we are and who we mean to be, honoring all our distinct complexities and glorious particularities in between. The arts move us, sustain us, and awaken us. And if we’re not connecting or creating, it can often feel like we’re doing little more than surviving. Even if we don’t see ourselves as artists we are probably more creative than we realize. Whether it’s writing the next great novel or making a luscious omelet out of the leftovers from the fridge, our lives are full of opportunities to create. And these moments of creating, both big and small, bring us alive. They fuel our work and uplift our spirits and they can do the same for students too.

Our classrooms can be hubs of connecting and creating as well. When we invite the arts into our school day, we help students learn how to pay close attention and listen generously, how to speak up when it matters, even how to find their own brief moments of beauty and joy when they need them the most. Every time we bring out the crayons or lead the song, invite the class to paint a self-portrait or write their first line of poetry, we’re breathing life into our classrooms. We’re shining a light on what could be and inspiring our students to shine it right back at us, into their projects, into the hallways, and out into the world.

## A COFFEE BREAK: LET’S GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER

Before we dive into how this book can help you harness the power of the arts in fresh ways, we thought we’d take a little coffee break for you to get to know us a bit. Here’s the origin story of how we met (our very own mini meet-cute!). By sharing this back-story we hope to provide insight into how our friendship and partnership inform our work. How we lean into our different backgrounds and perspectives as a way to model honest conversations and lead collaboratively.

When it comes to making new adult friendships, options can be limited. There are book clubs and coffee shops. The gym and the crafting aisle. One can hold out hope for a new neighbor or an organic run-in at the park. And of course there’s always the awkward setup from a well-meaning colleague, or if you’re up for it, the apps. Our story, however, is a bit more unlikely. If we were sitting on the *When Harry Met Sally*

couch, our friendship story might be closest to the couple with all the odds against them. Different generations. Different cultural references. Different upbringings. Different races. Different households (one with twins, one with a visiting neighborhood cat). And, as would become clear in our shared office space, different organizational habits—one of us likes books arranged a certain way, which she would say is the right way, and one of us takes what she would say is a more *laissez-faire* approach.

Not only were we from seemingly different worlds—Rebecca is a white Jewish woman with small-town, Midwestern roots and Veronica is a Black Chicana from the multicultural sprawl of Houston, Texas—but the circumstances of our meeting were also weighted with complexity. We met launching equity work. At a new school. Months after an international racial reckoning. In the height of a pandemic. And yet, within days of meeting, we realized we were kindred spirits. We would soon discover we both love Broadway and all things New York City. We both love books, bookstores, and a general bookish vibe. We both love comparing notes on the latest think pieces—everything from the state of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

## An Artful Approach to Belonging 101

### What is an artful approach?

An *artful approach* to belonging is one that is inspired by the magic of the arts and informed by culturally responsive practices. An artful approach deepens our capacity for noticing, pausing, and reflecting, and invites us to share the story of who we are, listen generously, and be in community with each other.

### What do we mean by belonging?

We like to think of *belonging* as students feeling truly seen, valued, and free to be their unique selves. Belonging work in the classroom goes beyond kindness and surface-level inclusivity by embracing differences and lifting up the voices of people who have historically been marginalized.

To learn more about belonging and the positive impact it has on academic excellence for all students and in school communities, we encourage you to look into the research of Claude Steele and Geoffrey Cohen. We have also both been inspired by the work of the Othering and Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley: Research Center for a Fair and Inclusive Society, which reminds us that a key part of belonging is “having a meaningful voice and the opportunity to participate in the design of political, social, and cultural structures that shape one’s life . . .” (Othering and Belonging Institute 2023).

(DEIB) in education to who is most deserving of this year's "Best Picture." We are both children's-lit fangirls and have strong opinions about classroom decor. And we both remember thinking at the end of our first epic text exchange, "thank god, you overthink everything too!" As we got to know each other better, we realized that we had some deeper connections as well. We both believed in the power of the arts to create classroom magic. We both wanted schools to be places where students felt free enough to be their unique selves and teachers felt inspired and supported enough to make that possible. We both dreamed of classrooms where children could express themselves not only with words, but with color, song, and movement too.

In those first few months, we would find ourselves meeting in the office or waiting in the school lunch line, deep in discussion about these ideas. We wondered if our two roles, literacy specialist and DEIB associate director, could work together toward building this dream of belonging for all students. In these conversations, we soon realized another deep connection: not only were we both educators but we also were artists. Rebecca, a performer and playwright, and Veronica, a fashion designer and stylist, had

### **An Artful Approach to Belonging in Schools**

An artful approach to belonging is not equity lite. This approach does not shy away from honest history, is not color-blind, and does not ignore the painful realities of systemic oppression. For educators and educational leaders to use an artful approach effectively, we must also expand our awareness of the structural and historical context that has led to inequity in our classrooms and communities.

If you're new to belonging work in the classroom, this book is full of tips, ideas, and artful practices to get you started, but you might also consider a paired read with *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain* by Zaretta Hammond (2014), *Start Here, Start Now* by Liz Kleinrock (2021), or *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides* by Geoffrey Cohen (2022a).

### **Getting Started with an Artful Approach**

Questions to ask yourself as you begin planning artful experiences that help foster belonging with students or colleagues:

1. How might I use the opening and closing moments to set a tone, create a feeling, and invite connection or reflection?
2. How am I incorporating the arts into the experience? Is there a story at the heart of this experience?
3. How might I invite participants to open up and share about their identities by starting with low-stakes options and moving toward deeper, more complex topics?
4. How is this experience informed by culturally responsive practices?

both witnessed the impact of the arts firsthand. And, as teaching artists, we had also witnessed the way the arts could transform the lives of young people. We decided we would integrate our creativity and love for theatre, music, and poetry into our work. In these early conversations, we began to dream up what would become our artful approach to exploring identity and fostering belonging.

Given our love for the arts, we just had to stuff this book full of some of our favorite stories, cultural references, artists, and icons. Alongside practical, user-friendly guides, you'll also discover the Cholita Climbers, Nick Cave soundsuits, Ashley Bryan puppets, and how to use Nikki Giovanni's poem about chocolate to launch an "Express Yourself" themed Black History Month. We also want to lift up people, places, and movements that rarely make their way into elementary classrooms: Yuyi Morales, Afrofuturism, Pow Wow remixes by Halluci Nation, Sean Sherman aka "The Sioux Chef," Duke Halapu Kahanamoku ("The Father of Surfing") all make an appearance. And we had to include a few mic-drop moments by Ta-Nehisi Coates and, well, of course, Beyoncé. Alongside these new and familiar voices, you'll find poems about everything from fearlessly swimming with sharks to rolling out masa with Grandma. And full disclaimer, there's also one-minute dance parties, a quick mention of *The Bachelor*, and theater kid energy sprinkled throughout.

In addition to all these spotlight stories that students will love, we also share teacher tips for launching the year artfully, checking in at every season, and responding to challenging moments that arise throughout the year. Every chapter includes charts to guide your planning as well as mini "scripts" that you can adapt to help you frame some of these big ideas in developmentally appropriate ways. You'll also find samples of lesson plans and student work to help you envision how these ideas come to life at different grade levels.

While we encourage you to begin with the first chapter, "Learning for Self-Growth: Picture Books, Poems, and Pop Culture," you can definitely read this book out of order. For instance, you might find it useful to dip into specific chapters that can help you think about upcoming units or how to support student conversations around identity as they arise. Or maybe you'll want to pull an idea from one of our go-to lists to use for an upcoming project or meetup, like "True for Me," a game for connecting with students, or "Elevated Water-Cooler Conversation Starters," which has fun questions for connecting with your colleagues, or "Identity Maps with a Twist," which can be adapted to explore identity with students or adults.

Like a pep talk with a work friend at just the right moment, we hope this book leaves you feeling energized, supported, and inspired. We hope it leaves you feeling like you have allies and co-conspirators in this work. Like you're ready to bring a whole new

# Three Things to look Out For!

**1. I-Perspective Moments** (Rebecca's Version or Veronica's Version): Not only is this book about an artful exploration of identity, it is written by two people from different backgrounds. As a result, sometimes you'll notice a break in the text in which we speak directly to the reader from each of our unique perspectives and identities. When we write from the "I-perspective," it'll look like this:

***R:** Hi! I'm Rebecca, a white woman who grew up in a small town in New Jersey, but NYC will always feel like my forever home. I am the mother of twins and feel very connected to the Jewish rituals, traditions, and life cycles my husband and I pass on to them.*

***V:** Hey y'all! I'm Veronica. I identify as Black and Chicana (my dad is Black and my mom is Mexican American) and I'm originally from Houston, Texas. While I grew up in Houston and spent much of my adult life in San Diego, I'm finishing this book in my dream town, NYC!*

These I-perspective moments help us make space for nuanced conversations and illustrate how our work is constantly informed by ongoing self-reflection and learning. We always teach from the inside out. And that means giving insight into who we are in life to show how that shapes the way we connect with students in the classroom.

**2. Handle with Care:** Occasionally, you'll notice this heart symbol alongside the text. We hope these "Handle with Care" tips remind our readers to pause and proceed with care as they adapt lessons, projects, and content that could potentially result in tricky or harmful moments if led hastily. For example, when you are reading a book aloud and you can't speak from the I-perspective of the main character, we provide tips for how to handle that moment with care.



**3. Closing with a Poem:** We wanted to provide an artful twist on the chapter summaries that typically recap key points throughout the book, so we decided to close out each time with a poem. Some of these closing poems might serve as a mentor text to inspire a new poem by using the stems in bold. Some of the poems, however, don't lend themselves as mentor texts and work better as a read-aloud or a shared reading experience.

**xx**

lens for the kinds of stories that can spark engagement in your students. Like it's OK to start with small and artful shifts that grow into a more significant impact over time. Like when you draw inspiration from the arts, the possibilities for creating, connecting, and belonging are limitless. Like there is joy in leading in this work and you deserve to take it in. Soak it up! Celebrate the wins! Take a moment to quiet those voices of doubt, to shush those "what-abouts" lurking in the shadows, and to say to them, "*This* is enough. *This* matters." Because a community poem might not fix our broken world, but it sure is a good place to start.