

A Guide for Centering
LOVE, JUSTICE,
and ***LIBERATION***
in Schools

humans
who
teach

SHAMARI REID

HEINEMANN, Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann

145 Maplewood Avenue, Suite 300
Portsmouth, NH 03801
www.heinemann.com

© 2024 by Shamari Reid

All rights reserved, including but not limited to the right to reproduce this book, or portions thereof, in any form or by any means whatsoever, without written permission from the publisher. For information on permission for reproductions or subsidiary rights licensing, please contact Heinemann at permissions@heinemann.com.

Heinemann's authors have devoted their entire careers to developing the unique content in their works, and their written expression is protected by copyright law. We respectfully ask that you do not adapt, reuse, or copy anything on third-party (whether for-profit or not-for-profit) lesson-sharing websites.

—Heinemann Publishers

“Dedicated to Teachers” is a trademark of Greenwood Publishing Group, LLC.

The author and publisher wish to thank those who have generously given permission to reprint borrowed material:

Harro, Bobbie. “The Cycle of Socialization.” In *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*, 4th Edition, edited by Maurianne Adams et al., Routledge, 2018. Copyright © Bobbie Harro. Reprinted with permission.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Name: Reid, Shamari, author.

Title: Humans who teach : a guide for centering love, justice, and liberation in schools / Shamari Reid.

Description: First edition. | Portsmouth, NH : HEINEMANN, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023051278 | ISBN 9780325160757

Subjects: LCSH: Teaching—United States. | Teachers—United States—Conduct of life. | Self-acceptance. | Self-care, Health.

Classification: LCC LB1025.3 .R4447 2024 | DDC 371.10209273—dc23/eng/20240110

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023051278>

Editor: *Tobey Antao*

Production: *Vicki Kasabian*

Cover and text designs: *Suzanne Heiser*

Typesetting: *Shawn Girsberger*

Manufacturing: *Jaime Spaulding*

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

1 2 3 4 5 VP 28 27 26 25 24

PO 4500886165

CONTENTS

Foreword/Forward iv

Intentions viii

Opening Letter x

1 CHAPTER 1 *The World and Us: Humans Who Are Socialized*

A place for us to explore our complicated humanity together and to get to know the cycle of our collective socialization as humans

21 CHAPTER 2 *Humans Who Have Self-Regard*

A guide for unlearning negative behavior that can lead to dehydrating ourselves as humans who teach

43 CHAPTER 3 *Humans Who Love*

An exploration of our human ability to practice radical love

59 CHAPTER 4 *Humans Who Teach with Love*

Exercises, tools, and guidance for drawing on love to teach for social justice

93 CHAPTER 5 *Humans Who Fear*

A framework to help us honor our commitments to justice and equity in education even in the presence of fear

Closing Letter 114

Appendix Additional Resources About Ballroom Culture and Black Trans Liberation 119

Works Cited 120

FOREWORD/FORWARD

What a book!

The three of us agreed that the *only* way to start a foreword for this wonderful book Shamari Reid has gifted the field of education is with a quote from our beloved ancestor Toni Morrison:

Don't let anybody, anybody convince you this is the way the world is and therefore must be. It must be the way it ought to be. (2019, 72)

This world must be one that embraces an ethic of love. Shout-out to bell hooks. Across our more than forty collective years working as professors of education, we have spoken and written extensively about the moral imperative of love in education and its role in transforming schools and the world into what they ought to be. In *Humans Who Teach*, Shamari centers love to guide us toward that world. And oh, what a beautiful world it is! A world where we can all enjoy the freedom to love ourselves and our communities without being oppressed or marginalized. More specifically, a world where teachers lovingly embrace their humanity and the inherent humanity of their students.

In a sea of voices seeking to continue the deprofessionalization and dehumanization of teachers, *Humans Who Teach* powerfully speaks back to these voices and reminds educators that, first and foremost, they are human. And within their humanity lie transformative possibilities for cultivating lives and classrooms characterized by love. Shamari's words gently guide readers on a journey through exploring how educators have been socialized to believe things about themselves, their students, and students' communities and how they must embrace their human ability to love in order to unlearn the beliefs (or *social lessons*, as Shamari calls them) that do not serve them or their students.

Shamari persuasively argues in this book that love must ground the work that educators do in their classrooms as we all work together toward creating schools and the world that *ought* to be. Love requires critical humility and it requires vulnerability. Shamari models this vulnerability. In *Humans Who Teach*, he vulnerably explores how as a teacher he navigated self-care, burnout, savior complexes, socialization, identifying harmful biases and beliefs, and a return to love. Right now our schools need more love.

Throughout our time in education, we have witnessed how too many schools have remained tethered to histories and legacies of racism, sexism, and other hateful ideologies that promote educational injustice and inequity. Unfortunately, this results in millions of children in our nation's public schools being abused, underserved, spirit murdered, and having their genius overlooked. This dark

reality is not disconnected from the many teachers who find themselves exhausted, overwhelmed, underpaid, and unsure of where to go next. Although Shamari states that *Humans Who Teach* is not a salve for every issue present in schools, he draws on bell hooks, Toni Morrison, his mother, former students, and a trio of phenomenal Black trans women to offer a loving, humanizing way to think about where we go next in these trying times, making sure we are focused on educational justice and liberation.

As Shamari shares in the vignette that opens Chapter 3, many teachers do not learn enough about the power of love in teaching for liberation and justice. All who read this book will not only expand their understanding of the role of love in schools but also gain access to concrete examples and an innovative framework for designing lessons, materials, and classroom communities grounded in love. Shamari takes his time to offer a practical definition of love that can inspire school transformation—one that is provocative, masterful, and desperately needed in education.

With Shamari guiding readers every step of the way with engaging activities, personal anecdotes, and reflection exercises, we are beyond excited for all educators to take their own journeys toward understanding how to better love themselves and their students.

We have watched Shamari grow as a scholar, a writer, and an educator and we could not be more proud of him. He never shies away from hard conversations about schools and teaching, and this book is another example of his

courage to speak against notions that dehumanize teachers and students; this book illuminates the richness of teachers' humanity.

As social justice teacher education scholars, we have investigated issues of educational inequity and injustice for many years. This book keeps us hopeful for the future of education as Shamari reminds us that love is the way to build the world and schools we all deserve.

We know that readers will be as grateful as we are to have *Humans Who Teach* as a guide to learn how to better love ourselves and our students as we fight for justice and liberation in schools. Let us move forward together.

Toward the world that ought to be,

Bettina L. Love, PhD

Gholdy Muhammad, PhD

Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, PhD

Nothing without intention. Do nothing without intention.

—*Goddess Lulabelle*

INTENTIONS

I have always believed that art is alive. Like Toni Morrison, I believe that writers must expect and encourage readers to read. We must assume that they will engage with and interpret our words, our art, through and within their own lived experiences, biases, and commitments, causing our work to take on a life of its own. A life with each reader as they collaborate with our language to make meaning. I have come to know deep peace in the art of letting go. I release this book. I gift it to you. And I know that you will do with it what you will, and I cannot control that. What you do with my words is up to you, but I would like to share that I created this book with intention. Not rules, but intention(s).

I intend

- for this book to embrace you while inviting you to be vulnerable and honest
- for my words and stories to make community with yours
- for this book to remind you that you're able to choose, center, and *be* love

- to invite you to feel until you are ready to act, without pressure
- to make it clear that there is action necessary to take up the ideas I share throughout this book and that this action is possible
- to show you that what I share in this text is not all feeling without action
- to show you that the ideas I share across these pages are not easy to act on, but neither are they impossible
- to push against the voices that make you feel like you must neglect your humanity to be a successful human who teaches
- to show you that practicing self-care alone will not result in the world you, your students, and their communities deserve
- for this book to result in large-scale transformation of the ways humans who teach treat themselves and are treated
- for this book to result in large-scale transformation of the ways young people experience schools
- for this book to be a starting place . . . for more love-filled schools and a more loving world
- to share my humanity with you

I intend for this book to embrace you while inviting you to be vulnerable and honest.

OPENING LETTER

A Human Who Teaches

I am writing this from the comfort of my emerald-green, rather worn-out loveseat in my hometown of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The sun engulfs the mini forest neighboring my apartment and shines through three floor-to-ceiling windows as Mariah sings about loss in the background; the dishwasher rumbles and my phone buzzes, reminding me that in a world of over 8 billion humans, I am not alone. I am a human who teaches. I am a human with an obsession for chocolate chip cookies without walnuts. And without pecans or peanuts. Toni Morrison is my favorite author. Perhaps she's my favorite person. I'm Black. I enjoy cooking, but I feel weird about cooking when I am requested or expected to do so. I grew up as the middle child and the only boy. I identify as cisgender and gay. I know a lot about Mariah Carey's discography. Her album *Butterfly* is my favorite musical project. The first thing I ever wrote outside of school was a copy of the lyrics to Mariah Carey's song "Petals." The second non-school-related thing I ever wrote was a short story about two siblings navigating life after losing their mother in a traumatic car accident.

These days I find joy in playing video games online with my youngest nephew. I've been heartbroken twice. I like TV. I like movies. Have I mentioned that I love Toni Morrison? In high school, I just knew I was going to be a cardiologist. After my first year of studying cell and molecular biology in undergrad, I switched to public relations. And then to education. I love food, although I didn't develop a liking for corn bread until after I turned thirty. I've lived in a variety of states in the United States: Oklahoma, Florida, New York, Texas. I am grateful to have also lived outside the United States in places like Argentina, Uruguay, Germany, Spain, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic. I'm allergic to cats and grass, apparently. I cry when I'm upset. I cry even more when I'm happy. I cry. My first job after finishing undergrad was as a high school Spanish teacher. I like stories. I'm human. I'm imperfect. And I deserve the most beautiful things life has to offer. I am a human who teaches.

This book is for us, humans who teach. Across this book's pages, I explore my own complicated humanity and invite you to do the same. I wrote this book after realizing that too often teachers are dehumanized and not allowed the space to explore what it means to be a human who teaches and who also deserves to lead a life full of peace, love, and joy. In this book, I rely on vulnerable storytelling to explore self-care, burnout, savior complexes, socialization, biases and beliefs, fears, and our human ability to love.

Too often teachers are dehumanized and not allowed the space to explore what it means to be a human who teaches and who also deserves to lead a life full of peace, love, and joy.

In addition, throughout the book, I have intentionally included multiple invitations for you to add your own stories of your experience, ultimately constructing a more com-

As humans who teach, we must engage with our own hearts and humanity, especially if our goal is to engage with the hearts and humanity of our students.

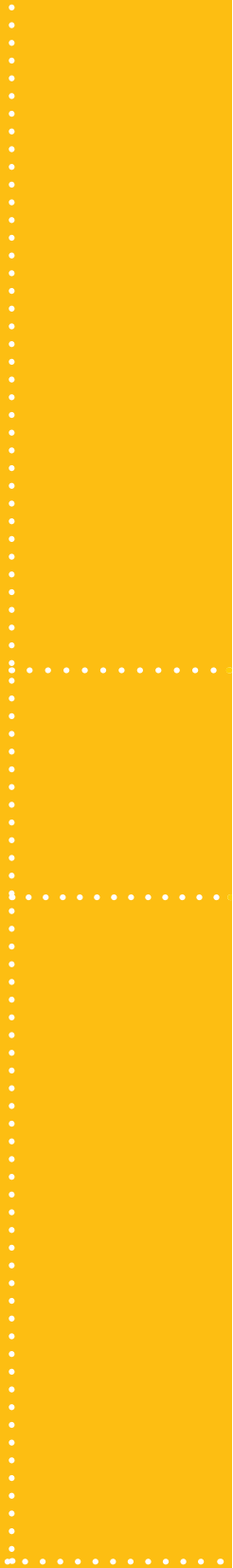
plete picture of what it means to be a human who teaches. It is my hope that this book brings us closer to the humanity of those of us who teach and the humanity of the students we get to learn with and from. I believe that as humans who teach, we must engage with our own hearts and humanity, especially if our goal is to engage with the hearts and humanity of our students. We must start with us. You must start with yourself.

I want you to take a moment right now to craft a personal snapshot, as I have done here. Your personal snapshot will be for you: you are your audience. It is an opportunity for you to see yourself—your humanity—and get closer to understanding what you need to live a life full of peace, love, and joy. Yes, you can talk about your professional and educational experiences. However, I encourage you to share something more. I invite you to see yourself beyond only what you do professionally. If needed, here are a few guiding questions: Who are you? What sentences, phrases, loose words, and stories would best illustrate your humanity?

In peace and love,



1



the world and us

HUMANS WHO ARE SOCIALIZED

m

y teacher was not an excellent storyteller, but my Black gay imagination was dope, so I looked

forward to story time. It was an invitation to be present, even if only in my own mind. Today, the teacher was going to tell a story about a family—a word that I had to come to define based on my own experiences with aunts, sisters, girl cousins, mothers, and other mothers. Family, for me, was Black women.

The teacher asked for our assistance. “So, let’s imagine we have a family, starting with the parents. We have a mom and a dad. What should their names be?” I was only three feet tall, weighed no more than fifty pounds, and had been around only for sixty or so full moons, but even I knew that not all families needed a mother and a father. Some families just needed a mother, sisters, girl cousins, and an aunt, while others just needed queer love. My classmates offered up names. Ultimately, the teacher went with Barbara and Dave. That was a family. Two parents. A woman, the mother. And a man, the father. And their biological children, of course. Anything else would not constitute family in this narrative.

School was the place where we were supposed to coconstruct knowledge about life, maybe death, and everything in between. As students, we were to trust that our teacher would guide us to discover the most important lessons of life. I am not sure what the lesson to be taught was that day, but I learned lessons that I have been trying to unlearn for over twenty-five years: Families with two same-gender parents were not possible. Families without fathers were broken. Families flowing from queer love were not imaginable. That day, my kindergarten teacher taught me that my current family—comprising many strong Black women, with very few Black men—was not a family, and queer love would never be enough to raise a child. Erasure.

THE PIE: HUMANS WITH SOCIAL IDENTITIES

I have an invitation for you. Take a moment to complete the following pie activity. I adapted this activity from one I first saw presented by a wonderful human who focuses on trauma-informed approaches to teaching, Arlène Casimir. You can engage more with Arlène in her book (coauthored with Courtney N. Baker) *Trauma-Responsive Pedagogy* (2023). I am forever grateful to Arlène and all the wonderful things I have learned with and from her.

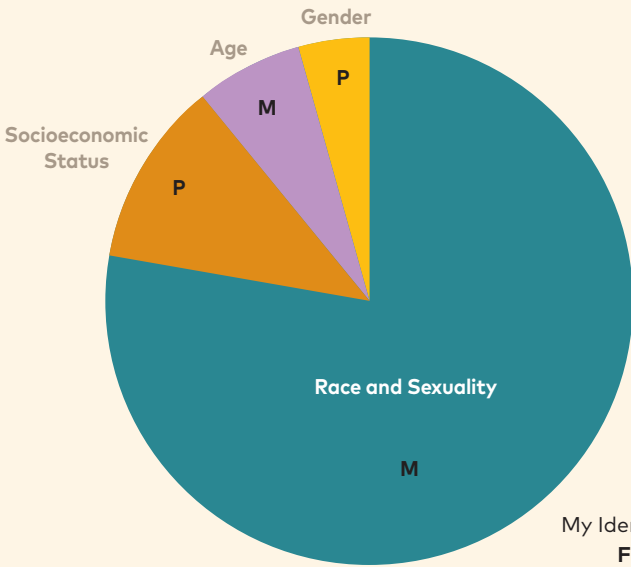
In my personal snapshot at the start of this book, I mentioned that I love food. I think about food often. In fact, there are some days in which my schedule is made around food. For example, I have my before-breakfast activities, before-lunch activities, and so on. Let's talk about food and what it means to be humans with social identities. In my personal snapshot, I also mentioned that I am Black, cis-gender, and gay. These are but a handful of my social identities. As humans who live in a society, we all have social identities. And my use of *social identities* here refers to who we are within a society, the groups to which we have been assigned, and the groups to which we belong or with which we identify. Some examples of common social identity categories are race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, religion or religious beliefs or spirituality, social class or socioeconomic status, (dis)abilities, and nationality. This is not an

exhaustive list. There are so many more. It is also important to note that within each of these categories we all have a social identity. That is, we all have a racial identity, a gender identity, a sexual identity, a social class or socioeconomic status, and more.

Thinking back to food, I want us to imagine that we are pies. In my opinion, pies are delicious. I love sweet potato pie, apple pie, blueberry pie, key lime pie, and coconut cream pie. And yes, please add a scoop of ice cream to all! You may have some pies you're thinking of right now. Perhaps you don't even call them pies. Or you might be from New York City, and when hearing "pie," you think of pizza. Pizza can work for this example too.

All pies are made from an assortment of ingredients. Some pies are made from flour, sugar, fruit, and other spices. Not all pies are the same. In some pies, the sugar might be a more noticeable ingredient or salient flavor than in others. In my favorite pie, sweet potato, I love how strong the cinnamon and nutmeg are. I want you to imagine you're a pie, and that your ingredients are your social identities. Not all humans are the same. And for some of us, certain social identities might be more salient than others. For example, I might think about my race and sexual identity more than others think about theirs. The truth is, anytime I walk into a room, I am always aware that I am Black and gay. Another example: my sister has shared with me that she is always aware of her gender identity and what it means for her to be a woman in society. And the truth is I believe she thinks about her gender identity more than I think about my gender identity as a man in society. Our pies are different.

1. All of us have multiple identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexual identity. Use the circle (pie) in Figure 1–2 to illustrate your salient identities—the identities that you think about most. Try to vary the sizes of the different slices in your circle to represent the ones that you feel are more salient. If your racial identity feels more prominent for you, make its slice larger. Please feel free to include all your identities, even if I haven't mentioned them here.



My Identity Pie
Figure 1-1

I have shared my pie in Figure 1-1. I have combined race and sexual identity because I have never thought about these identities separately. My pie is mine. Your pie is yours. The important thing is to make sure that each of our pies accurately reflects how we feel about ourselves right now. My pie has combined identities; your pie may not.

2. Once you've completed your identity pie, go back and label each slice with a *P* or an *M*. Let *P* stand

for privileged identities and *M* stand for marginalized identities. For example, everyone has a racial identity, but certain racial identities are privileged (white), while others are marginalized (Black, Brown). The same is true for sexual identity, social class, and other identities. It is important to understand our unearned privileges and our undeserved marginalization as humans who teach. As we recognize our social locations, we grow our understanding of how we have contributed to the marginalization of others and the perpetuation of the status quo, never interrupting the cycle of socialization. That is, if white teachers do not grow their consciousness around how they benefit from white privilege, it will be difficult to work with students of color to interrupt the things that threaten their academic, social, and personal success. If cisgender and heterosexual educators do not understand how their gender and sexual identities have been normalized, it will be hard for them to work with queer and trans youth, whose identities have been marked as abnormal or inappropriate. James Baldwin once said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced" (1962). Let us face the truth. And may we always remember that we are not just educators. We are humans who are Black, trans, Muslim, women, bisexual, immigrants, have disabilities, and grew up speaking Mandarin. And these parts of our humanity matter, as they often inform how, why, and what we teach. We will return to your pie to explore what this means for us humans who teach, and for our students.

your
identity
pie

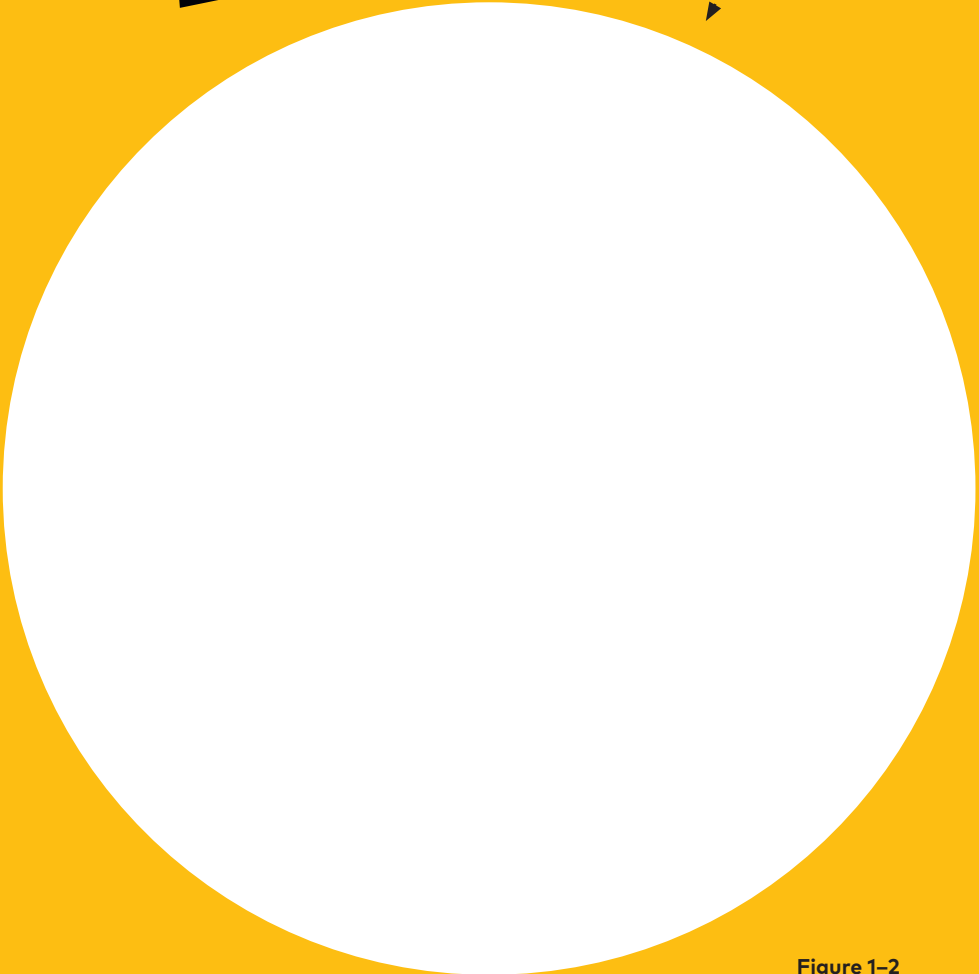


Figure 1-2

Humans Who Have Been Socialized

As a kindergartner, I did not have the language to identify my teacher’s actions as cis-heteronormative.¹ However, I

As humans we are not exempt from a cycle of socialization that conditions members of a society to regard certain socially constructed identities as superior and normal and others, such as LGBTQ+ identities, as inferior, inappropriate, unnatural, and in need of fixing (Harro 2018).

know that even just shy of six years old, I felt uneasy. I felt invisible, forcibly erased. I was aware that through discourses of heterosexuality—the stories we tell to and about people and what we regard as acceptable, appropriate, and normal sexual identities—I was not a “normal” boy (Pascoe 2007). I now realize that my

teacher, like others who have been socialized in the United States (Harro 2018), may have been acting on a belief she had been taught—a belief mired in cis-heteronormativity that led her to conclude that all families needed a mother and a father, a belief that moved her and other teachers to expect, reward, and perpetuate cis-heteronormativity, inviting their students to participate in the “cis-heterosexualizing process” (Keenan 2017; Pascoe 2007).

Teachers, like mine in kindergarten, are human. As humans we are not exempt from a cycle of socialization

1 *Cis-heteronormativity* refers to the dangerous assumption that, by default, everyone identifies as cisgender and heterosexual and that every healthy or normal family configuration includes a cisgender woman as mother and a cisgender man as father. Simply, it is the belief that cisgender heterosexual people are normal and that queer genders and sexual identities are not normal.

that conditions members of a society to regard certain socially constructed identities as superior and normal and others, such as LGBTQ+ identities, as inferior, inappropriate, unnatural, and in need of fixing (Harro 2018).

According to Harro's (2018) theory of socialization, all members of a society move through a series of processes in which they become socialized to accept certain ideas as immutable facts.

Through implicit and explicit messages provided by those closest to us, such as family, friends, and even teachers, and institutions such as schools and churches, we are introduced to dominant notions of personhood and normalcy. Furthermore, these individual institutions reward us when we adhere to these social codes and punish us when we do not. Consequently, we learn how to be and to play the roles that we have been assigned based on our identities in an inequitable social system. Gender identity and sexual identity are, in fact, roles we are assigned.

An example: Often, in the United States, heterosexism is pervasive in everyday discourses. Thus, the ideology that men practice romantic and physical relationships only with women becomes the dominant one. And because it is one of the dominant paradigms circulating through society, all who are socialized here are likely to internalize its message about the appropriateness and normalcy of heteronormative relationships and the deviousness of relationships

Through implicit and explicit messages provided by those closest to us, we are introduced to dominant notions of personhood and normalcy. We are rewarded when we adhere to these social codes and punished when we do not.

flowing from queer genders and sexualities. These beliefs are not only internalized by individuals but further reified and enforced by institutions. In this way, I now find it logical, albeit dangerous, for my kindergarten teacher to tell stories centered only on heteronormative family structures. My teacher was not unique, and my kindergarten classroom was not the only one that invited children to construct half-truths about what constitutes family.

Schools all around the country are also subject to and enforcers of heteronormative perspectives of humanity and the emotional, romantic, and sexual relationships we are able to have with one another. Teachers invite students to participate in the cis-heterosexualizing process by not only centering cis-heteronormative families in the stories they tell to their students but reinforcing cis-heterosexist school practices and policies as well (Ingrey 2012; Pascoe 2007). These cis-heterosexist practices and policies manifest themselves in schools during playtime, for example, making it dangerous for boy-identified children to play with dolls or fake cooking sets or try on dresses and other feminine clothing items in the dress-up station. They are ever present in line practices that separate students by perceived or actual gender (Eliot 2010). They are embedded in school practices such as dances and homecoming rituals that encourage boy-identified students to avoid vying for the role of homecoming queen and prevent girl-identified students from becoming king (Pascoe 2007).

Pervasive cis-heteronormative socialization in our society and in our schools has a profound effect on students. In the latest GLSEN climate survey, around sixteen thousand LGBTQ+ students between the ages of thirteen and twenty-one, from all fifty states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and Guam, were surveyed about their experiences in schools. The data revealed that more than half of the LGBTQ+ youth surveyed felt unsafe in schools, with 70 percent of these youth experiencing verbal harassment and almost 60 percent expressing that they heard anti-LGBTQ+ remarks from their teachers and other school staff (Kosciw et al. 2020).

Socialization includes not only gender and sexual identity but also race, class, language, religion, and many other social identity markers. The interpersonal interactions I had with my teacher were in many ways informed by the institutions within which we both lived, grounded in the dominant ideological pollen that we both ingested. We were both humans who had been socialized to believe certain things about ourselves and others. If you are like me, a human who learns a great deal from visuals, you might find the diagram in Figure 1–3 helpful in understanding how socialization works; it is Bobbie Harro’s explanation of her theory of socialization.

THE CYCLE OF SOCIALIZATION

The Beginning

We are born into a world with the mechanics of oppression already in place.

We have no consciousness, no choice, no blame, no guilt.

There is no information or limited information or misinformation about social identity and power.

Bias, stereotyping, prejudice, habits, tradition, and a history of oppression already exist. We inherit them without our permission.

We do nothing and the cycle continues.

We choose not to make waves.

We live with or promote the status quo.

We fail to challenge, question, or think about what's wrong with this picture.

The Continuation

This socialization leads to bad outcomes for those with and without power: misperceptions, dissonance, silence, stress, collusion, inequality, anger, guilt, hate, self-hatred, self-destructive behaviors, violence, crime, and internalization of patterns of power for the future.

Direction for Change— Movement Toward Liberation

We begin to see that something is wrong with this picture.

Something makes us begin to think, to challenge, to question the system.

Results

First Socialization

We are socialized by people we love and trust, and taught to play our roles and follow rules.

They shape our self-concepts and self-perceptions as well as how we see others. They shape our dreams, our values, our expectations, and our future roles.

We get mixed messages and feel confused and guilty for not understanding.

The Core

that keeps us in the cycle:

- Ignorance
- Insecurity
- Confusion
- Obliviousness
- Fear

Institutional and Cultural Socialization

We are consciously and unconsciously bombarded with messages about who should have power and who should not by the **institutions** we encounter: education, religion, medicine, law, criminal justice, government, social services, and business. We are brainwashed by our **culture**: media, language, patterns of thought, holidays, and song lyrics.

Those who stay in line are sanctioned, while those who don't are punished, persecuted, stigmatized, or victimized by discrimination.

A system of rewards and punishments keeps us playing by the rules.

(Harro 2018)

Enforcements

Figure 1-3

Unlearning Social Lessons

We are all humans capable of love, whose bodies harbor fears and who are susceptible to socializing waters that wash away the most human parts of us and throw us ashore with a warped sense of ourselves and others.

I can trace learning to think of queerness as wrong back to when I was six years old. My socialization started at a very early age, as does that of all humans. However, only recently have I been able to accept this truth and understand my full humanity. And the moment I learned to see my humanity, it became impossible not to see the inherent humanity of everyone else with whom I share this beautiful earth. We are all humans capable of love, whose bodies harbor fears and who are susceptible to socializing waters that wash away the most human parts of us and throw us ashore with a warped sense of ourselves and others. But this book is not about my teacher or the things she learned about gender and sexuality; it is for us, humans who teach. My teacher is not unique. She taught based on the many lessons she learned as a result of social conditioning. I took my own social lessons into my first years of teaching as well. I use *social lessons* to speak to the things that I learned about my social identities and those of others. These lessons are complicated, layered, and deep. And my journey toward deciding which of them to hold on to and which ones I must let go of because they have disastrous consequences for students is ongoing. I am unlearning, evolving, learning, and letting go

of social lessons every day. Let's take a look at one social lesson that I had to unlearn. This lesson may be familiar to you, or you may have different lessons to unlearn.

A Social Lesson to Unlearn: I Am a Superhero

When I received news that I had been offered my first teaching job, I decided to celebrate with a dozen tamales from El Patio, my favorite tamalería on the southwest side of Oklahoma City. At the time I had a 2007 two-door Chevrolet Cobalt that I was so proud of because it was the most expensive thing I owned. Years later I would realize that I also owned my life and could do anything I wanted with it. I drove my Cobalt southwest until all the signs were in Spanish and I had to guide it around basketball-sized potholes in the street. As I devoured my tamales (the spicy chicken ones stood no chance), I fantasized about how I would save my students in my new role as teacher. They needed me. They were waiting on me. I had been fed this idea that as a Black man, I was the answer to the many questions around educational inequity and injustice. I knew what to do. I could not wait to run to the mall and cop the “I teach. What is your superpower?” shirt. I was socialized to believe that my pedagogy was going to rescue my Black students and students experiencing poverty from racism, classism, and other social ills. I was no longer human; I was a teacher.

Once the school year began, I would trade my car rides to El Patio for late nights in the school building, grading,

lesson planning, reorganizing my classroom, responding to parent and student emails, and thinking about grading and lesson planning. I just knew that if I worked and moved with no work-life balance, I could help my students escape all the things about their lives that they did not deserve. I could get them out the hood. With me, they would beat the system. They just needed a little tough love and I was the one, as I had been taught to believe, who had to give it to them. I was going to make sure that they made it over every obstacle placed in their lives by racism, ableism, (hetero)sexism, transphobia, classism, linguicism, settler colonialism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and other insidious forms of discrimination. And if they didn't overcome these obstacles, I wasn't working hard enough. Or perhaps they weren't working hard enough.

In my quest to encourage them to be exceptional despite systemic oppression, I had this amazing idea to publicly display every class' grades on the chalkboard. I would make it known to the whole school how many As, Bs, Cs, Ds, and Fs each class had.

Every week I would update the board to reflect the latest changes to each class' grades. And every week I would give this speech about being as strong as your weakest link and how we had to help lift up those at the bottom. During these rants, I was aware that the students who had been given the lower grades sometimes put their heads down, asked to go to the bathroom, or even cried. I ignored these things. They just had to work harder. I had to.

I am human. I have limitations. I am not perfect. I cannot save students, and my students do not need saving. My savior complex was grounded in whiteness,² which I had been socialized to internalize. It was dangerous to expect them to overcome systemic barriers simply by “working hard,” as defined by white measurements. And it was dangerous to punish them when they did not successfully overcome these things. In my journey to save them, I dehumanized us all. I never cared if we were happy. Joy in learning was not a priority. We did not talk about our emotions. We were not allowed to be human. We worked to achieve something we had been taught was desirable. It didn’t work! My extreme, dehumanizing method did not produce any real changes with regard to the students’ grades. And even if it did, it would not have been worth the pain I caused them.

Just as my kindergarten teacher learned somewhere in her socialization that cis-heteronormativity was normal and should be the center of all stories about family we tell to and about kids, somewhere in my socialization I learned that students from marginalized racial and socioeconomic backgrounds are lazy, are in

My socialization made it difficult for me to comprehend that race and class identities matter and often lead to unearned privileges and status as well as undeserved marginalization.

2 I use *whiteness* to refer to a way of thinking, doing, and living that promotes the superiority, advancement, and normalization of white people, their ideas, and their practices. Whiteness is the belief that white people should sit atop the social hierarchy with the greatest access to power, privilege, and resources to maintain their place. Whiteness ranks people and mediates their access to power and resources based on not only race but gender, ability, sexual identity, and other social identity markers.

need of saving, and can achieve their way out of their oppressive circumstances. Similarly, I learned that folks who had achieved academic and professional success as defined by societal standards (many of whom were white and grew up with class privilege) were the ideal: they had worked hard and earned their place atop our social hierarchy. My socialization made it difficult for me to comprehend that race and class identities matter and often lead to unearned privileges and status as well as undeserved marginalization.

If you are struggling to identify a social lesson, or let go of one, you are not alone. I struggle too. And there are some lessons that even after twenty-five years I am still trying to unlearn. And that might be expected; I am human. And as a human, I am susceptible to a powerful cycle of socialization that makes it hard for me to see how I have been socialized and even harder to let go. However, as a human, I also have the ability to love. And it is this human ability to love myself, my community, and others that has always served as a way out of my socialization. Let's talk about love.

WHAT SOCIAL LESSONS HAVE YOU LEARNED?

Return to your pie. What is something you have learned about one of your social identities? How has this social lesson impacted your teaching? What are the consequences for your students? Is this a lesson you'd like to hold on to or let go of? Why?

