



MEET 8
STUDENTS
& ALUMNI
FINDING
ANSWERS

The Seekers

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ON APPIAN WAY

The Impact of Impact

Punch the word “impact” into the search box at the top of the Ed School’s homepage. You’ll get at least 160 pages — not entries, but pages — worth of stories, press releases, faculty bios, and department profiles that mention impact in some way.

But at the Ed School, impact is more than just a word that we like to toss out there. It’s an action and a vibe that you feel when you talk to faculty about their research or when you interview students and alumni for stories about the projects they’re working on or the new ideas they want to follow. It’s something Dean Long stresses during faculty meetings and at all-staff check-ins. It’s something the content creators in our office think about when they write stories, take photos, post on social, and interview experts for our podcast.

Impact also became the flashlight I used when I started looking for current students and recent graduates who were trying to find solutions — sometimes lofty, sometimes practical — to some of the problems they had encountered as students, teachers, parents, and community activists. Not surprisingly, all eight of the solution “seekers” that I profiled in this issue’s cover story came to their work because of something they had experienced firsthand, like a pain or a frustration. These days, those feelings have turned into something else — hope that they can have a positive impact on the world of education.

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In May, graduates from the classes of 2020 and 2021 came to Cambridge for a second commencement — this time, in person. For many, it was their first Harvard gathering not on Zoom.



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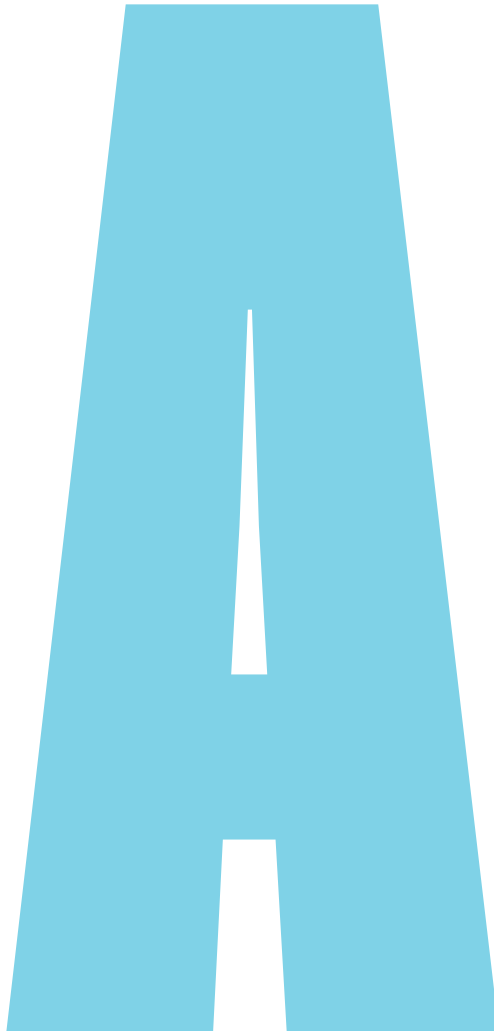
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“If you don’t understand how restaurants are the way they are,
how are you supposed to change them?”

JENNY DORSEY, CURRENT ED.M. STUDENT (SEE P. 20)



THE NINJA NEXT DOOR

AS A KID, growing up in Sunnyvale, California, **JOSH LEVIN, ED.M.'22**, couldn't stop climbing — on everything.

"I was climbing trees, door frames, tables, lampposts — you name it," he says. "Fortunately, my family decided to try to find a constructive outlet for this energy and signed me up for climbing classes at a local climbing gym in California."

Interestingly, his education played a part in turning this outlet into his passion.

"My mom homeschooled my brother and me through middle school, which put a huge emphasis on agency over my own education," he says. "Being homeschooled also allowed an enormous amount of flexibility with the schedule for training and traveling for climbing."

Little did his family know, though, that this passion would lead Levin to competing in national bouldering challenges, at World Cup competitions around the world, and — while a student here at the Ed School — on *American Ninja Warrior*, the hit NBC obstacle course show where this past year, he became one of only nine competitors during the show's 14 seasons to make it to stage four.

And while Levin wasn't the "last ninja standing" in season 14, he went further than he had in his three previous attempts on the show: He made it to the finals all four times, but this was the first time he advanced to that fourth stage.

"That's what *Ninja Warrior* is really about," he said in a recent interview with his hometown paper. "It's not about beating somebody else, you know, trying to be the best. It's about achieving mastery. And what I mean by that is making sure you're doing your absolute best. You're competing for the best intentions,

Recent grad masters Hornet's Nest and Eyeglass Alley on his way to finals of *American Ninja Warrior*

Story by **Lory Hough**



Josh Levin swings across the
Beehive obstacle during season 14
of *American Ninja Warrior*

“It’s not about beating somebody else, you know, trying to be the best. It’s about achieving mastery. And what I mean by that is making sure you’re doing your absolute best.”

you’re competing alongside others, cheering each other on.”

This idea of competing alongside, not against others is partly what got him interested as a teenager in trying out for the NBC show.

“I saw videos of *Sasuke*, the original Japanese show, which *American Ninja Warrior* is based off, on YouTube when I was about 15,” he says. “The obstacles looked incredible; it seemed to be the perfect athletic intersection of climbing, parkour, and gymnastics. I was also inspired by the competition format, in which it was explicitly the competitors versus the course, not each other. When they launched the American version of the show later the same year, I was super excited to try it out until I found out you needed, at the time, to be 21 to apply. I ended up having a pretty bad shoulder injury and surgery when I was 21, waited until I was 22, then applied and competed on *American Ninja Warrior* for the first time in 2016.”

This past year, the show dropped the age requirement to 15 and Levin, by then in his late 20s, found himself training with (and eventually competing against) teenagers. The age change helped him shake up how he got ready for the competition, he says.

“I traveled to Connecticut and Colorado to train with some of the current prodigies of the sport,” he says, “as well as some older competitors who have had success in more recent seasons.”

He also shook things up this this season when he decided he had to take more risks and not always play it safe if he was going to get further along in the competition — something that he feels held him back in his previous three attempts.

“I’m generally a risk-averse competitor, and this year I decided to take some big risks in the hopes that it would pay off in the final rounds in Las Vegas,” he says.

These days, looking forward, at least in terms of climbing, Levin says he’s going to spend more time focusing on another challenge: outdoor rock climbing.

“My goal is to complete the most difficult climbs I can in two different climbing disciplines: bouldering and lead climbing,” he says, meaning the kind of climbing that involves short distance and the type that involves long distance, both using safety equipment. “The main objective for me is to climb V15 and 5.15” — two grades of difficulty, both strenuous and only for expert climbers — “which for me feel within the realm of possibility.”

As for his non-climbing career, Levin is back in the classroom, teaching engineering at the Synapse School in Menlo Park, California. Prior to Harvard, he worked at Synapse as a STEAM consultant and as an athlete mentor for a nonprofit called Classroom Champions. It’s these experiences, he says, that made him want to come to the Ed School.

“I wanted to expand my understanding of education,” he says. “Before HGSE, I’d had many informal experiences teaching at a variety of levels, but never had formal training in how to structure my approach to teaching and learning. HGSE is the preeminent institution for education, and the new LDIT Program fit my interests and passions perfectly.”

The program also allowed him to fit in the strenuous training he needed to be doing during this season of *American Ninja Warrior*.

“I ended up having a pretty light spring semester,” he says, having loaded up on classes over the summer and during the fall and J-terms, “which allowed me a ton of extra time to train for the show. There are also a couple MIT undergrads, Guang Cui and Daniel Sun, who have competed on the show the past couple years, and I decided to reach out to them to see if they were interested in training together. They ended up being incredible training partners and we helped push each other to have our best seasons yet.”

His Ed School classmates and professors were also supportive.

“A bunch of them had a virtual sideline watch party for my qualifying episode in March,” he says. “Then a separate group of



Harvard climbing friends actually made the trip out to Vegas to cheer me on in person right before graduation in May.”

Asked what kind of advice he has for his students that he can take from his recent experience competing on *American Ninja Warrior*, Levin circles back to the advice he gave himself about taking risks.

“Sometimes in life, you need to step outside your comfort zone and take risks if you want to break through barriers,” he says. And most of all? “Go for it!” □

Inside Story

Siblings write the book they needed

For NICOLE JAIN, ED.M.'11, the children's book she recently published is the kind of book that would have been helpful when she was a girl. *Our Mom, Our Superhero*, co-authored with her brother Ravi is about the experience of two young siblings trying to help their mother deal with mental illness. It's based on the experience the pair had with their own mom. This fall, Jain spoke to *Ed.* about the book.

What's the goal of *Our Mom*?

To help children understand the importance of personal mental health from a young age while being able to understand, recognize, and help those in their lives with mental illness. In this story, the mother struggles with depression, causing her to have difficulties managing her home and work life. Her children begin to see a change in their mother and are left to navigate the healthcare system to find her the appropriate resources and care. Further, the story of the daughter/sister Mya falling and scraping her knee requiring medical treatment is meant to help children understand the similarities between physical and mental health.

This is personal for you.

Yes, my brother and I experienced a similar journey as children trying to help our mother who was suffering from depression.

What role did stigma play?

Within our Southeast Asian community, there has always been a lot of stigma surrounding mental



Nicole Jain and her brother, Ravi Sharma

illness, especially 20 years ago. We were isolated from the community, received no help, and were left to navigate the convoluted process alone. In the book, you will find that "we" sought help and, more specifically, reached out to our aunt. She did not help us and provided no support or adult guidance. We were left to navigate the different mental health resources available.

What made you want to turn your experience into a book for kids?

The idea actually arose after my brother started OOTify, a digital, research-backed mental health company that gathers and provides customized mental health

resources and services. His company not only provides customized support for enterprises like hospitals and nonprofits, but also assists college students who are in need of mental health resources. Through the startup process, we began to recall our family's experiences with mental illness and realized how valuable an earlier introduction to mental health as children would have been.

Are there other books like yours?

There are other children's books out there discussing mental health but none that focus on the child's perspective while educating children on specific mental health terms and topics.

The book is based in research, which is why you include definitions, correct?

Yes, this book is not just based on anecdotal experiences. We worked closely with doctors, psychologists, parents, therapists, and teachers to put together a list of definitions that easily explain central mental health topics. This includes words like "support group," "stigma," and "psychiatrist."

You're working with teachers?

We have partnered with the University of Southern California (USC) and the USC Joint Educational Project to provide lesson plans. Through these partnerships, we will work with teachers and train tutors to implement several interactive lessons that go along with the book for underprivileged students within the communities surrounding the campus.

You're currently director of strategy at OOTify, but previously worked in schools?

Yes. I worked on the policy teams at Chicago Public Schools as well as the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Ultimately, you and your brother were able to help your mother.

Yes. We were able to secure therapy, medical management, and lifestyle support (sleep hygiene, routines, and better nutrition), which have successfully helped our mother remain in remission for many years. LH

FEATURE





THE SEEKERS

In the education world, it's easy to identify problems, less easy to find solutions. Everyone has a different idea of what could or should happen, and change is never simple — or fast. **But solutions are out there, especially if you look close to the source:** people who have been impacted in some way by the problem. Meet eight current students and recent graduates who experienced something — sometimes pain, sometimes frustration, sometimes hope — and are now working on ways to help others.

Story by **Lory Hough**

Illustrations by
The Project Twins



SEEKER

Elijah Armstrong
Ed.M.'20

Elijah Armstrong remembers what started his fierce drive to help students with disabilities: flickering lights. More specifically, when his magnet high school in Jacksonville, Florida, wouldn't allow for an accommodation when the flickering lights in his math class caused him — a photosensitive epileptic — to have seizures. He asked to take the class with another teacher in another room. He even asked if they could just change the lightbulbs. The school wouldn't budge, so he eventually went to the media. Armstrong's story spread and disability activists started reaching out to him.

"This motivated me to become an activist in the space of disability and education," he says. "Education is supposed to act as a gateway for students, but far too often, for people with disabilities, it acts as a barrier."

His experience led him to start

a nonprofit while he was in college at Penn State called Equal Opportunities for Students "as a way to help tell the stories of marginalized students in education." Then last year, he won the 2021 Paul G. Hearne Emerging Leader Award, an award given by the American Association of People with Disabilities that recognizes up and coming leaders with disabilities. With his prize money, Armstrong started his own award program: the Heumann-Armstrong Educational Awards, named partly for disability rights activist Judy Heumann. The award is given annually to students (sixth grade and up) who have experienced ableism — the social prejudice against people with disabilities — and have fought against it.

"Students with disabilities face barriers in education that aren't faced by their non-disabled peers," he says. "At all levels of education, students are forced to do intense emotional and logistical labor to fight for accommodations or go without accommodations at all. This is on top of the day-to-day challenges of having a disability or chronic illness, and the challenges that go along with that. Students with disabilities should have ways of being compensated for that labor and denoting that labor on resumes."

One of the unique aspects of the award program, he says, is that winners aren't restricted on how they can use their award money, although several from the inaugural round have used it to fund their own activism.

For example, Otto Lana, a high school student, started a company called Otto's Mottos that sells T-shirts and letterboards to help purchase communication devices for non-speaking students who can't afford them. Himani Hitendra, a middle schooler, has been producing videos to educate her teachers and classmates about her disability, as well as ways they can be more inclusive. Jennifer Lee, a Princeton student, founded the Asian Americans with Disabilities Initiative.

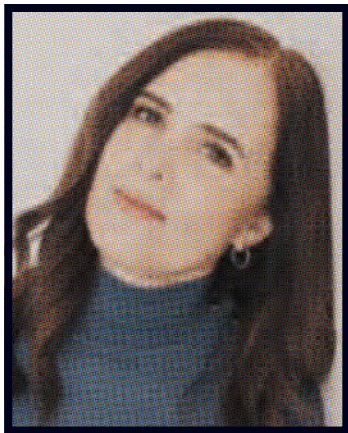
Armstrong, who is also currently living and working in Washington, D.C. as a fellow with the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, says beyond awarding money to other young activists, one of the biggest and most

impactful ways he thinks he's helping to challenge the education system is through the videos his nonprofit produces for each of the winners.

"We highlight the award winners and give them a platform to tell their stories in a way that gives them agency," he says. "Education doesn't often take the voices or experiences of disabled students into account when discussing accessibility in education. We want to make sure we develop a platform that gives voice to the narratives of these students, so that everyone can listen to and learn from them."

Learn about his nonprofit:
equalopportunitiesforstudents.org

"Students with disabilities face barriers in education that aren't faced by their non-disabled peers. At all levels of education, students are forced to do intense emotional and logistical labor to fight for accommodations or go without accommodations at all."
Elijah Armstrong



SEEKER

Elisa Guerra
Ed.M.'21

Elisa Guerra says she became a teacher “by accident” — and then that accident got replicated in schools across half a dozen Latin American countries.

In the early 2000s, Guerra wasn’t finding the kind of educational experience for her young children near her home in Aguascalientes, México, that she was looking for — one that was warm, but also ambitious and fun and stimulating.

“I saw a gap between what schools offered at that time and what parents like me were dreaming of for their young,” she says. “After my son went through three different schools and none was a true fit, I decided that I needed to imagine and create the school I wanted for my children.”

So Guerra, without any formal teaching experience, started Colegio Valle de Filadelfia, a small preschool with 17 kids that was based on what she was doing in-

formally at home with her own-children. Those first few years, she says she pretty much did every job the school had, learning along the way.

“I taught. I answered the phone. I designed our programs. I managed promotion and enrollment,” she says. “I also changed diapers, cleaned noses, and mopped puke.” For many years, she served as the principal.

She also fine-tuned their learning model, what they started calling *Método Filadelfia*, or the Philadelphia Method. Based on the work of Glenn Doman and The Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential, their model isn’t your typical approach for helping young children learn.

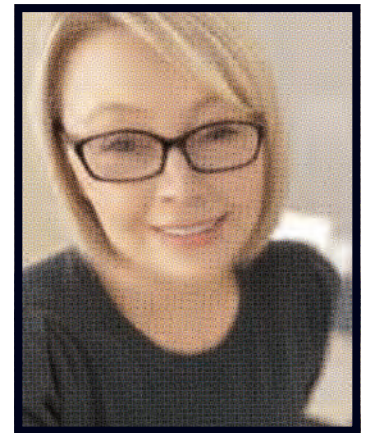
“We teach — playfully and respectfully — tiny children, starting at age three, to read, and [we also teach] art, physical excellence, and world cultures as the first steps of global citizenship,” she says. Music lessons, including violin, are started at the preschool level, and classes are taught in two foreign languages in addition to a student’s first language. When Guerra first started the school, there were no commercial textbooks that fit what she was trying to do, so she wrote her own.

Since then, schools across Mexico, as well as Costa Rica, Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia, and Ecuador now use her textbooks. Al Jazeera made a documentary about her as part of their Rebel Educator series. Twice she was a finalist for Global Teacher of the Year. Just before the pandemic

hit, she was appointed to UNESCO’s International Commission on the Futures of Education, a small group that includes writers, activists, professors (including Professor **FERNANDO REIMERS, ED.M.’84, ED.D.’88**), anthropologists, entrepreneurs, and country presidents. (When UNESCO first reached out to her, she thought it was a scam and almost didn’t respond back to them.)

And it all started 23 years ago with an idea and, as she says, some naivete.

“In retrospect, it was crazy. Most people I know who have opened schools have done it ‘the right way,’ if such a thing exists,” Guerra says. “They were experienced teachers, or they even ran schools as principals, before jumping out to create a new one. They could do better because they knew better. I did not have that advantage. I had so much to learn myself. But in a way, that was also a blessing because I also had much less to ‘unlearn.’ ...I said before that I became a teacher accidentally, but that is only partly accurate. Indeed, I was not expecting my life to take the path of education. But once I found myself there, it was my decision to stay. The discovery of a passion for teaching was the accident. To embrace the teaching profession was a choice.”



SEEKER

Cynthia Hagan
Ed.M.'22

From the moment Cynthia Hagan, a library director, applied to the Ed School, her plan was to return home after graduation to serve the children of West Virginia.

“I’ve lived here for 35 years and have witnessed the impact of poverty and the opioid crisis on our communities,” she says, “both on current realities and hopes for the future.”

Initially, when she first applied to Harvard, she thought she’d create a children’s program using puppets, inspired, in part, by *Sesame Street*, but after taking a few classes, Hagan’s ideas on how to help children in her state evolved.

“I became fascinated with the concept of designing for joy as introduced to us in the course *What Learning Designers Do*,” taught by Senior Lecturer Joe Blatt, she says. “Joy is an often-overlooked ingredient for learning.” The power of story also began to stick.

After creating a class project

Read more about her work:
elisaguerra.net/english/

called Adventure Box, focused on increasing third-grade reading levels for children experiencing homelessness, Hagan's idea for Book Joy emerged.

Research shows that children who are not proficient in reading by the third grade, when they transition from learning to read to reading to learn, are four times more likely to drop out of high school, and six times as likely to be incarcerated as an adult.

"I knew that the overall third-grade reading levels of children experiencing poverty in rural Appalachia were significantly lagging," she says. "It just seemed like a logical move to modify Adventure Box to meet the needs of this population."

She decided to focus first on McDowell County, West Virginia, once one of the largest coal producing areas in the world, where the child poverty rate in 2019 was a staggering 48.6 percent.

Hagan's idea with Book Joy is simple but potentially life altering for the young children they began targeting starting this past September: give each incoming kindergarten student a curated box filled with high-quality books (printed and audio) based on interest and reading level, plus fun related activities to conceptualize the reading experience, and then follow up with new boxes quarterly (December, March, June) until third grade. The goal is to significantly increase third-grade reading proficiency.

For the launch this fall, Book Joy partnered with Scholastic to get discounted books and with

Random House for free books. McDowell's assistant superintendent/federal programs manager has been actively involved. Twice a year, Book Joy will conduct assessments with the students, their parents, and their teachers, to see how each box is working, and then tweak the content. They'll also use feedback to improve on future boxes and teachers can use assessments to provide individualized intervention, as needed.

"When their interests, reading levels, or personal circumstances change," says Hagan, "so does the contents of their box."

Another goal for Book Joy, beyond improving third-grade reading proficiency for children in one of the poorest districts in Hagan's state, is something fundamental to this former librarian: to bring joy to reading and learning, hence the name, Book Joy.

"Each box is truly a gift created just for them. No two boxes will be alike because no two children are alike," she says. "And we are designing these boxes from an edutainment perspective, putting as much focus on eliciting joy as we do in choosing the best aligned reading material. We want every design element of the box, from the moment the children lay eyes on it to the emptying of every item, to elicit joy."

Discover how you can help:
givebookjoy.org



SEEKER

Ben Mackey
Ed.M.'13

Ben Mackey has wanted to make an impact on the environment ever since he was a freshman at the University of Florida. Now, as a school board trustee in Dallas, Texas, he's getting that chance — in part because of students who kept pushing for change.

In 2020, the district unanimously passed the Environmental & Climate Resolution, a massive overhaul of how schools in the Dallas Independent School District approach climate change. It includes reviewing and revising current policies across all schools and setting goals for reducing the district's environmental footprint, while also keeping an eye on spending.

Mackey, a former math teacher and principal, says that it was young people in the district who really got the ball rolling when it came to making sure the district was thinking about its impact on the environment and then mak-

ing a plan for change — something few districts are doing.

"The genesis of this resolution and the work really started with students," he says. "When I took office in 2019, there was a small but mighty group of students who had been coming and attending every board meeting and sharing their perspectives and imploring the school board to make strides in its sustainability work. I was able to work with these students to get this resolution drafted and passed by the school board."

What passed is a 10-year plan to drastically improve the district's sustainability practices, including some steps that have already been taken, including switching energy plans and contracting for 100% renewable energy, which is expected to save the district \$1 million a year on top of the energy benefits. By 2027, all plates, utensils, and trash bags will be 100% compostable.

Longer term, the district has applied for a federal grant to pilot 25 electric busses and will begin moving away from gas-powered maintenance equipment. It will limit synthetic fertilizer. The district also created a set of policies that say any new school built or existing school remodeled must include LEED silver certified standards. Another goal is to plant more trees to combat the "heat island" effect that schools that are primarily blacktop experience.

"One area that stuck out to our community group and administration as they were formulating the recommendation is how the increase in tree canopy cover



can combat carbon emissions, improve learning environments, and serve to decrease energy usage,” he says. “We’re aiming to increase canopy cover at all campuses to at least 30% and we’re working with a number of phenomenal partner organizations to get this started, including the Texas Trees Foundation and the Cool Schools Parks initiatives.”

Mackey, who is the executive director of a statewide education nonprofit called Texas Impact Network (in addition to being on the school board), says his advice to other districts that want to reduce their school’s climate footprint is to get buy-in across the district — and just get started.

“Dallas ISD’s process started with students at our board meetings, speaking every single month, about the need and importance for this to happen. These students reached out to trustees and school staff and continued to come forward with both a charge and ideas for what success looks like,” he says. “The hardest part is often to get it off the ground and I’d encourage all who care about this to call your school board trustees and be a consistent and sensible voice who will share their mind and provide concrete solutions to make this work happen.”

Sign up for his monthly newsletters:
benfordisd.com



SEEKER

Michael Ángel Vázquez

Ed.M.'19, current Ph.D. student

Michael Angel Vázquez knows first-hand that graduate school can bring on anxiety for students. He experienced it when he began his master’s in 2019, then again when he started the Ph.D. Program. As an activist and organizer on campus, he’s also seen other students suffer.

That’s why he’s trying to make the graduate years, at least for Ed School students, less stressful.

“I just went through this huge burst of depression my first year, my master’s year,” he says, “and I realized that I wasn’t the only one that was going through that.”

Part of the problem, says Vázquez, a former teacher in the Navajo Nation, is that while universities often offer great resources, many students don’t know where to turn for help or don’t even think they *should* ask for help.

“There’s so much pressure to feel like you know everything

and not admit when you don’t,” he says.

Vázquez decided to create a comprehensive student-to-student guidebook, based on resources he knew about and those shared by other students. This “labor of love,” as he calls it, includes everything from where to find books and readings to how to save money, including where to grocery shop, how to sign up for MassHealth, how to apply for SNAP benefits, and how to sell items to other students through the Harvard Grad Market. He has a section on job hunting. The mental health section offers tips for finding therapists, wellness options at Harvard, ways to combat vitamin D deficiency,

and advice for advocating for yourself. Other documents include ways to prep for graduation, must-have lists for living in a colder climate, and a link to local tenants’ rights.

“I just felt like it was important to do whatever was possible for the next group of students to have a safe, happy experience, because, ultimately, learning should be fun, should be exciting,” he says. Endemic to being back in school, with all of the pressure, “it’s very common for that fun and excitement of learning” to take a back seat. “I don’t want that to be the case. This guidebook is just one way to mitigate that a little bit and make it more fun and exciting for people.”

“I saw a gap between what schools offered at that time and what parents like me were dreaming of for their young. After my son went through three different schools and none was a true fit, I decided that I needed to imagine and create the school I wanted for my children.”

Elisa Guerra

None of this support and concern for the well-being of other students surprises Vázquez's professors, who point out that he has been one of the most active students since he got to Harvard. He's been especially in-tune with first-gen students (he's first gen, starting with attending the University of Southern California) and for students of color, both at the Ed School and at the college, where he's a tutor at Adams House. He's also been a teaching fellow for ethnic studies classes at the Ed School since 2019 and will now help teach ethnic studies to undergraduates at Harvard starting this fall. He hopes creating and sharing his guide helps all of the students he's around.

"As a student and as somebody who is a teaching fellow and who has worked in different organizing groups on campus and off campus, I see that grad school and organizing are often very stressful," he says. "I really want to drill that it's OK to not know something and that learning is shared, which is why I did this. There were things I didn't know at first. I want to share that knowledge with others, and I want it to be community-built. When you admit you don't know something, that's when you truly learn something."



SEEKER

Grace Kossia
Ed.M.'17

Grace Kossia is trying to help students connect with the mathematician that lives inside of them.

"Anytime one of my friends unconsciously has a math moment, I always yell out, 'You're a mathematician!'" she says. "Too many people are walking through this life convinced that they could never be good at math. Math isn't meant to be something we're good at — it's simply something we do, and when mistakes happen, we learn."

It's this philosophy that she and her coworkers bring to their edtech nonprofit based in Brooklyn, New York, playfully called Almost Fun, which last year helped 1.5 million middle and high school students with free online math lessons.

"The title 'Almost Fun' winks at the way students perk up when they engage with our resources and find unexpected joy while learning math," she says. "We

value being real with our students, and part of that is understanding that math can be a hard pill to swallow and that schoolwork may not be the number one thing students are going to want to do. However, with the right approach, we can curate experiences that make math learning 'almost fun' and something to look forward to for even the least confident learners."

The backbone of their approach includes explaining concepts using easy-to-understand examples, rather than through clinical, mathematical definitions. Their distributive property lesson, for example, relates expanding and factoring an expression to opening and closing an umbrella. Their functions lesson uses a vending machine to explain how functions represent the relationship between inputs and outputs. Another lesson compares absolute value to the overall power of a superhero or villain.

Kossia says their site is meant to complement existing online sites like Khan Academy, which she says has been a trailblazer in edtech that serves many students. But as helpful as Khan is, some students still need more help — or just a different approach.

"There is still a critical number of students who struggle with high levels of math anxiety and low math confidence, which limits their ability to take full advantage of the support online resources like Khan offer," she says. "At Almost Fun, we want to position ourselves as a complement to these existing resources by using

creative math analogies to explain foundational math concepts and bridge the gaps in students' math confidence and motivation, so that they can better benefit from the support other resources offer."

Kossia remembers the gaps she struggled to fill after she immigrated to the United States from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. At the time, she was good at math, and decided to major in mechanical engineering in college. She had a hard time.

"I quickly realized that I had many gaps in my understanding of math and physics, which were essential skills I needed in this journey," she says. "This chipped away at my confidence, but I was determined not to give up. I wanted to prove to myself and other people like me, especially Black women, that it could be done." Later, when she worked as a physics teacher, her struggles helped her relate to students who were anxious about physics and pushed her to design creative lessons that focused on learning by doing, as opposed to learning by memorizing.

"At Almost Fun, I do the same thing but with math as the primary focus," she says. "We believe math is more than just sets of memorized steps; it's a way of describing relationships between things in our world."

Access resources and lesson plans:
almostfun.org

Download a copy of the guide: gse.harvard.edu/ed



SEEKER

Shaina Lu
Ed.M.'17

One summer, when Shaina Lu was running a school-age child-care program called Red Oaks at a community center in Boston's Chinatown neighborhood that serves 13,000 Asian and new immigrant families each year, their camp curriculum focused on the neighborhood's rich history and current struggles, including the effect of gentrification.

"Learning about gentrification is unavoidable in place-based learning in a place like Chinatown," Lu says. "However, it could be kind of a drag to spend your fourth-grade summer learning about gentrification."

So Lu, an artist and former media arts teacher in Boston Public Schools, decided to make learning about this heavy topic more interesting: she created a graphic novel.

"*Noodle and Bao* was my response to that feeling. I wanted to write and draw a story that el-

ementary kids would devour and love — There's a cat selling food in a cart! Neighborhood kids dress up and infiltrate a snobby restaurant! — but would also pay homage to some of these inspirational histories and present-day struggles they were learning about," she says. While the novel isn't specifically set in Boston's Chinatown — it's set in a fictional Town — Lu says it's inspired by the many residents, activists, and community members of Boston's Chinatown that she has met and worked with over the years — people who "have done so much exciting work that is more than comic book-worthy."

Set to publish in the fall of 2024 by HarperCollins, *Noodle and Bao* also explores historical events from Boston's Chinatown, most notably a fight for the land that now houses the community center where Lu worked and where elderly residents passionately voiced their displeasure to hotel developers at a meeting.

Lu says the graphic novel is just one example of something that has been important to her for many years: the intersection of art, education, and activism. Another example is a creative placemaking project she recently worked on in Chinatown with a local student in partnership with a local resident.

"The resident, youth, and I painted a community mural that featured [the resident's] personal lens on the history of Chinatown," she says. "The mural was painted on a condemned building on a border of Chinatown that is

slowly being eroded away by the neighboring district. It's hard to parse out which separate part was 'art' or 'activism,' or 'education,' so I feel like they're interwoven."

Although she's interested in teaching, Lu says classrooms are tricky places. "There's an inherent power structure with the teacher as the fountain of knowledge and students as recipients of that." Instead, "I'm interested in disrupting the capitalist status quo of education with 'winners and losers' as described by activist-philosopher Grace Lee Boggs in her 1970 essay, *Education: The Great Obsession*."

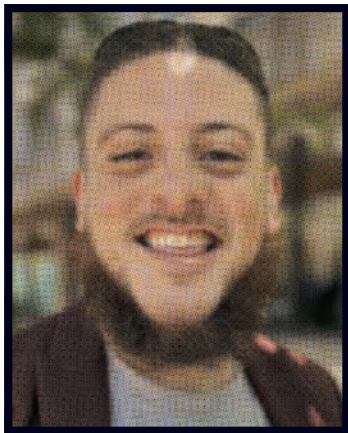
She's not interested, though, in

disrupting the system on her own.

"I hope to be, alongside others, building a new system, where people's needs and interests and social responsibility define their learning, rather than their ability to produce," she says. "There's actually so much incredible person-centered education out there, both in and out of schools. I've worked with teachers who engaged students with civics project-based learning about gentrification, youth workers who have helped young people organize community gardens for their neighborhoods, and more."

Learn about her art:
shainadoesart.com

"Too many people are walking through this life convinced that they could never be good at math. Math isn't meant to be something we're good at — it's simply something we do, and when mistakes happen, we learn." Grace Kossia



SEEKER

Justis Lopez

Current Ed.L.D. student

Forget the coffee. Current doctoral student **JUSTIS LOPEZ, ED.L.D.'23**, starts every morning with, as he puts it, “a bowl of gratitude, a cup of joy, and a sprinkle of hope.” He does this in honor of his family and his elders, who he says deeply shaped his experience in life.

“I hold near to me that there are ancestors that wanted to study, but didn’t get the chance to,” he says. “There are relatives that wanted to pursue their dreams, but they put food on the table instead so that I could pursue mine, and for that I am eternally grateful and full of joy.”

It’s this gratitude and happiness for life that Lopez, a DJ known as DJ Faro (for the Spanish word, lightkeeper), is bringing to his time at the Ed School and to Project Happyvism, the culturally responsive nonprofit he started with his friend, Ryan Parker, a youth empowerment teacher and activist, that is rooted in hip hop

and is a combination of happiness + activism.

“Project Happyvism is a feeling, a philosophy, and a movement that centers joy and love as a radical form of activism,” he says, meaning the commitment to loving yourself and those around you unconditionally.

“The organization embraces the beauty and need for joy,” he says, “and emphasizes the fact that maintaining happiness about who you are and what you think, say, and do in a world that consistently goes against the grain of your identity is a form of activism in itself, hence: happyvism.”

The project started from a song and video that Lopez and Parker wrote and produced and has since expanded to include helping others write songs (what they call

“joy anthems”) in their recording studio, publishing a children’s book, *Happyvism: A Story About Choosing Joy*, and working with K-12 districts on related curriculum. They also started Joy Lab, a community gathering space in Manchester, Connecticut, where Lopez grew up, that offers yoga, wellness and equity workshops, and book readings. He plans on starting a Joy Lab at the Ed School during his time here.

“I’m just trying to create the spaces I wish I had for myself growing up,” Lopez says. “Spaces that center healing, hope, and hip hop.”

Although this is his first year as a student at the Ed School, Lopez has been involved with the school in the past, including as an organizer, MC, and DJ at the Alum-

ni of Color Conference, thanks to Lecturer **CHRISTINA VILLARREAL, ED.M.'05**, who later convinced him that getting into Harvard was a possibility. He also attended the Hip Hop Experience Lab conference run by Lecturer **AYSHA UP-CHURCH, ED.M.'15**.

Previously, Lopez was a high school social studies teacher in Connecticut and created a hip hop class and afterschool program in the Bronx. He worked in the Hartford public schools as a climate, culture, and equity strategist, and was an adjunct professor at Stephen F. Austin State University in Texas. One day, he’d like to reach even higher and become the secretary of education for the United States.

“Policy is created by people and it’s important to have people in positions of leadership that understand the experiences of the students and educators they serve,” he says. “An important factor of that being a classroom teacher. When you have taught in the classroom you understand the human-centered perspective that is needed in education that goes beyond any policy. Of the last 11 U.S. secretaries of education, only three have been classroom teachers. Secretary Cardona makes the fourth. I want to build upon the human-centered approach he has brought to the role.” □

“I’m just trying to create the spaces I wish I had for myself growing up. Spaces that center healing, hope, and hip hop.”
Justis Lopez

Find your joy and listen to their music video: projecthappyvism.com

Joseph Longbottom finds inspiration in his grandfather's Harvard thesis Story by Lory Hough

JOSEPH LONGBOTTOM CAN thank his brother's desire not to live on land for the framed 1940 Harvard dissertation that was hanging above the bookshelf in his living room in Denver.

The hand-typed dissertation, focused on the theories of French philosopher Henri Bergson, was written by the Longbottoms' grandfather, Robert Lincoln Coffin Rein'L. After Robert died, the dissertation was handed down to Joseph's brother, who was starting to become interested in philosophy.

"We used to marvel at the pages together," says Longbottom, a first-year student in the Ed School's Doctor of Education Leadership Program (Ed.L.D.).

But then his brother decided to live on a sailboat, and so the dissertation was again handed down, this time to Longbottom, who was the principal of an elementary school in Aurora, Colorado, far from any oceans. "We wanted to ensure it was safe and always stayed in the family. My wife had it framed, and we mounted it above the bookshelves in our living room. It is a beautiful document that is completely hand-typed on about three inches thick of old parchment paper," Longbottom

says. "My mother told me the story about granddad making a mistake and needing to type it twice. It was quite the undertaking."

It was also inspirational, which is why Longbottom decided to take it with him when he moved to Cambridge to start the Ed.L.D. this year. He was nervous, and despite a long career in education, including time as an instructional coach, school media specialist, teacher, and principal, he questioned if he had what it took to get a doctorate, like his grandfather, at such a well-known university.

"Like so many, I wondered whether I would be 'good enough' for the Harvard name," he says. "My grandfather's dissertation was a reminder to just be myself and trust that I belong. Before each interview, I would give it a kiss to calm my nerves. Although my grandfather was no longer around, it felt as though he was somewhere rooting me on."

Longbottom says he didn't explicitly apply to Harvard for his doctorate just because of his grandfather's experience, "although I do love the idea of starting a family legacy that I can potentially pass down to my own son," he says. Instead, "when researching doctorate programs, the Ed.L.D. Program stood above all

others. The program is geared toward practitioners who are driven to disrupt systemic inequities that plague our education system and that is me. I am so eager to learn with and from my 24 classmates and the distinguished faculty members."

There's also a chance we may see some air guitar on Appian Way this year.

A musician, Longbottom started incorporating air guitar into his work, first starting when he was a media specialist and elementary school teacher in Kansas City, where he grew up.

"I have used air guitar in a variety of ways in my educational career," he says. "It started as a project to teach my elementary students the importance of risk taking and perseverance. I have also used it as a principal and EL Education National Conference presenter to help educators experience how authentic feedback using clear success criteria can rapidly improve the quality of student work."

The question now is, will he teach his Ed School classmates how to rock out?

"I have no idea at this point, but I wouldn't rule it out," he says. "Who says deep learning can't be fun?" □

THE LONGBOTTOM

Thesis



INTUITION AND ANALYSIS
IN BERGSON'S THEORY
OF KNOWLEDGE

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY
AT HARVARD
UNIVERSITY

ROBERT LINCOLN COFFIN REIN'L

MARCH
1940

**Joseph Longbottom
with his grandfather's
1940 Harvard thesis**

Jenny Dorsey wants to educate people about her passion: food

Story by Lory Hough



JENNY DORSEY IS A bit of an anomaly at the Ed School. She's never been a teacher or superintendent. She's not interested in working at the Department of Education or at an ed-tech startup. She's interested in food.

And she's interested in educating others about food.

As she wrote in her Harvard statement of intent, "Food tells us where to belong. At least, I know it did for me. As a first generation Chinese American, how I learned my place in the world in relationship to food: where I sat at the dinner table; who I could linger with during lunch at school; what flavors, textures, and appearances of food were acceptable and 'good' — and in contrast, which ones were 'foreign' or 'different,' like me."

"Disgusting," something she heard often from her classmates in the cafeteria, is a word she still feels "crawling" up her spine, she says, "hissed by others when I unscrewed my hot thermos. ... Like so many other immigrant children, the task of eating at school every day played out as a battleground."

This is partly why Dorsey, who went on to culinary school and competed on the Food Network three times — once on *Chopped*, once on *Cutthroat Kitchen*, and another time on *Beat Bobby Flay*, where she did beat Flay — decided to spend a year studying at the Ed School.

"I believe it's critical to build a different food education that challenges the notion that our relationship with food is just one of physical need," she says, explaining her reason for getting her master's in education. "Take a close look at how we eat, and it reveals hidden parts of who we are: what people we are apt to judge, what skills we tend to deem valuable, what narratives we are committed to believing. Yet right now, we are repeatedly inhibiting the next generation's capacity to understand the very foundation of our society by not integrating the role of food history and politics into our education systems."

This is where Studio ATAO comes in. Dorsey started the nonprofit, which stands for

"all together at once," to help educate people about the food, beverage, and hospitality industry through programming and research initiatives such as the one focused on equitable representation in food and beverage media. Studio ATAO's main offering is Food Systems 101, a curriculum made up of seven modules that will be accessible online next year. (Culinary students are currently testing it.)

Dorsey is hoping the curriculum, a crash course into how food systems developed and continue to work, will not only educate people studying these important issues, but will also reach those actually working in the industry. It's not enough, she says, to have only "food academics" paying attention. Discussions need to reach people actually growing the grapes and waiting on tables who may not realize how the food system that controls their lives has grown to be where it is today.

"Fundamentally, education is an important part of making sure people feel empowered to do something," she says. "Having worked in the food industry, a lot of people do feel a sense of powerlessness. I don't want to ascribe that all to education, but a lot of it is, if you don't understand how restaurants are the way they are, how are you supposed to change them?"

Her goal this year as a student at the Ed School is to expand on the work she's doing at Studio ATAO and around food justice.

"I'd like to learn a lot more about effective curriculum design, student engagement, and especially adult development patterns," she says. "In particular, I'm interested in how to support adults in unlearning problematic, internalized, socialized narratives and build capacity towards individual and collective change." □

Learn about Studio ATAO:
jennydorsey.co

Check out one of Dorsey's favorite recipes: gse.harvard.edu/ed



Jenny Dorsey in the kitchen at Pagu, a Japanese tapas restaurant in Cambridge, owned by friend and fellow chef Tracy Chang

Ideas

B

“It’s Jason Wingard!” I called to my husband. “He’s going to be president of Temple University!”

JEAN RAMSDEN, ED.M.'97 (SEE P. 34)



CONNECTIONS

Memories of a Grandfather — and Caring Teachers

A personal understanding of why support is critical for refugee learners

Story by Zuhra Faizi,
Ed.D.'21



I CLASP MY grandfather's hand as we walk through the boisterous market, beads of sweat forming on our foreheads. I choose a juice box and turn towards our house, but soon enough, someone notices him: "*Asalaam alaikum haji sahib.*"

Almost everyone in the little market down the street from our modest, clay house in Peshawar, Pakistan, where we as Afghans sought refuge, seemed to know him. When I reflect on my childhood, I see my grandfather, a tall man who wore a black and white turban with white Afghan clothes every day I spent with him. His graying beard poked my face as I leaned on him. We lived in a house with my four uncles, a room for each uncle and their families. The most unusual thing about my childhood was that my brother and I were the only cousins whose father was in college in the United States. My grandfather filled my dad's absence, spoiling us with snacks and taking us everywhere with him.

At the time, more than 20 years ago, I didn't know what "refugee" meant. My relatives created their own community, celebrated weddings, spoke Dari, bought new clothes, and my aunt decorated our hands with henna the night before Eid. I was faintly aware that we weren't from Pakistan and that my other grandparents and aunts lived in Afghanistan, that our home had cool weather, taller mountains, and sweet melons. Now as an education researcher, I think about the importance of my family's support

in my trajectory to Harvard and the ramifications of the lack of these very support structures for so many refugee learners.

After my parents moved our family to the United States when I was six, they made sure that we would stay connected to Afghanistan. We would speak with relatives on the phone and plan summer trips. As the concept of family, which included my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, shrank with our move to the United States, the mosque, the Colorado Afghan community, and school expanded our connections to enable new relationships. In Colorado, I loved learning and planning elaborate presentation posters; my art projects were displayed in school and in the public library.

Connecting with American, largely white peers, however, was not easy, making the one-hour lunch break in the cafeteria unbearable on most days. After 9/11, the distance between my classmates and I widened. While my classmates chatted about yearbook photos and football games, I pondered how we would be able to send money to Afghanistan to pay for a cousin's operation without being accused of funding terrorism. On some lunch breaks, I would retreat to the school li-

brary, scanning aisles of books searching for anything close to my culture. A book about a Jewish and Palestinian friend. An Indian girl who is married off young. Orientalism was not a part of my vocabulary then, but I could not engage with books that painted experiences of "other" societies as distant and alien, putting them back after reading a few pages. Why were these worlds so dreary and depressing? I had Palestinian and Indian friends at the mosque in Colorado who were energetic and funny with dreams and hopes and connections to many homes.

Thriving in school without healthy relationships and a sense of belonging seemed impossible. I was fortunate, however, that a few of my teachers showed curiosity and created space for me to express and explore my interests. Mrs. Howe, my seventh-grade social studies teacher who smelled like roses, shared her experiences attending an all-girls' Catholic school as she inquired about hijab and Islam. After 9/11 and the subsequent global war on Afghanistan, she would gather articles about Afghanistan and ask about my relatives. On some days, I would stay in her class and miss French, the last class of the day, pouring out my heart to her about the war, media coverage,

"While my classmates chatted about yearbook photos and football games, I pondered how we would be able to send money to Afghanistan to pay for a cousin's operation without being accused of funding terrorism."



and family. When I transitioned to high school, Ms. Clapham, my government teacher, helped me get through the next three years. (I finished a year early.) She met my parents, visited our home and the mosque, and taught three of my younger siblings. Ms. Clapham was even at my doctoral dissertation defense at Harvard in May 2021. For me, what made these teachers special is their recognition of the enduring connections we all have to home, community, and family.

Not all my experiences with teachers were positive. In the eighth grade, a year after Mrs. Howe retired, my science teacher asked how Muslims greet each other. When I explained that “*as-salaam alaikum*” means “peace be upon you,” he remarked, “That’s strange since Muslims blow things up.” My heart sank. I was silent for days, trudging the hallways with his words repeating in my head. The following year, a

couple of boys I had known for many years would jokingly shout words like “jihad” and “terrorist” when I was in their vicinity. Moments like these made me realize the vitriolic power of mainstream and facile media narratives. Despite my frustration with these narratives, I had always assumed my teachers and classmates could separate me from these war-driven narratives. The recent coverage of the Ukraine crisis, that people with “blue eyes and blonde hair” are not the same as those *other* refugees and are more deserving of assistance reinforces how little has changed after all these years.

The support I received from some teachers, as well as the shocking realizations of the pernicious image many Americans have about Muslims and Afghanistan, inspired me to pursue graduate studies after attending the University of Colorado Boulder. My intrinsic passion for Afghan-

istan and the possibilities of education coupled with a yearning to investigate frequent criticisms hurled at Afghans for not valuing education led me to the Ed School. The context of war, poverty, and past heavy-handed state policies rarely come into simplistic narratives about Afghans. At every step, I remember my turban-wearing grandfather who cradled me in his arms when my dad was studying in the United States; my cousins in Afghanistan who are learning English and computer skills in private courses and through lessons on the radio; the children I met in 2018 during my dissertation fieldwork who were displaced by war to the outskirts of Kabul, where they arrived to class half an hour early to work on art projects with their teacher, a man who resembled my grandfather in appearance and character.

Recently, through Harvard’s Refugee REACH Initiative, I

created a resource for American teachers on ways to support Afghan refugee students, drawing on my research on education in Afghanistan as well as affirming experiences with my own teachers in the United States. However, I have also been contemplating how much we demand from teachers. Ms. Clapham and Mrs. Howe were exceptional in cultivating genuine relationships and learning experiences. I sincerely believe we enjoyed each other’s presence. Yet, it should not be teachers alone who have responsibility to counter destructive media representations of Muslims, immigrants, or refugees; to fill curricular gaps or search for engaging, nuanced literature and resources; to challenge xenophobia within schools and in the country. So many wonderful teachers already do this work but most often without the instructional and institutional support backing them. My resource is inspired by them and seeks to elevate their practices. However, they should not be alone in the process of creating safer schools and communities where children thrive, where their connections to their transnational homes are validated, and where future prospects are supported. □

Zuhra Faizi, Ed.D.’21, is a researcher at REACH at the Ed School and a lecturer at MIT

Download Faizi’s resource at gse.harvard.edu/ed

Bianca Baldrige, Associate Professor

As the fall semester was kicking off, Associate Professor Bianca Baldrige shared what's currently in her book rotation and why she'd invite her sister-scholars to her book group.

What are you currently reading?

Right now, I am reading *The Prophets*, a novel by Robert Jones Jr., also known as Son of Baldwin.

What drew you to this book?

Robert Jones Jr. has a popular website called Son of Baldwin. For years, I've appreciated his analysis of race, Blackness, gender, sexuality, and culture. He's a very honest writer, and I'm always drawn to honest and vulnerable writers. I was very excited when I heard that he had published his first novel. Many of my favorite authors raved about it, so I wanted to make sure I had a chance to read it.

What kind of reader were you as a kid?

Growing up, I was the kind of reader who read in waves. I enjoyed reading, and there were times when I would be consumed with books for weeks or months. And then I'd have periods when I was more into watching television shows than reading. As a child, I reached for books that my parents bought for themselves, much to my mom's dismay. She would often say, "You're too young to

read that novel." Of course, that made me want to read it even more. Haha.

What's the last interesting or useful thing you read in a book?

The most recent thing that stopped me in my tracks and made me think differently comes from Kevin Quashie's newest

book, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, where he writes in the introduction: "This equation of Blackness and death is indisputable and enduring, surely, but if we want to try to conceptualize aliveness, we have to begin somewhere

else." It's a simple statement that carries a lot of weight for me. I think about problems often. I'm great at that, but I always need reminders to move to a space of envisioning and reimagining something different. Something as simple as "beginning somewhere else" is powerful to me.

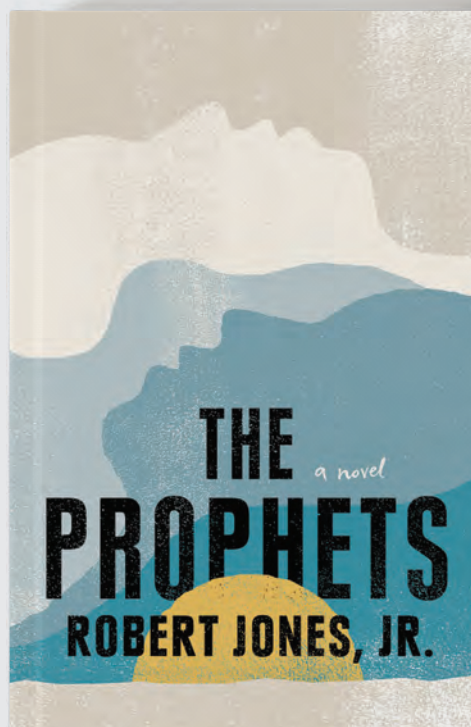
You're forming a book group at your house. Name three people you'd want in the group.

My father Mac Baldrige Jr. While he spent more than 30 years as a dedicated bus driver for the Los Angeles School District, he always wanted to be a history teacher. He is such a Black history buff. He always asks great questions, and I've always loved his curiosity. Author Kiese Laymon. While I don't know him personally, I enjoy his writing immensely. I also enjoy his

analysis of just about everything and his love for Black folks. I'd learn a lot from his insights.

I'm going to cheat a little and say a group of about four Black women I call my sister-scholars. I appreciate book clubs that allow you to talk through the book and draw connections to your personal life. This requires empathy and vulnerability, and my sister-scholars have the capacity to do this. And it just so happens that everyone on my list has a great sense of humor. I need jokes and laughter!

Is there a book you're assigning to your students this year that you think all educators should read?

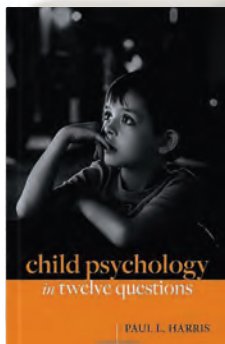


I'm mostly assigning excerpts from books rather than entire books this year. I am assigning my book (*Reclaiming Community: Race and the Uncertain Future of Youth Work*) for my course, Education and Resistance in Community-based Organizations. I promise I don't do this to be a snob, but, because it's an ethnographic text that shows the intimate day-to-day of a community-based youth program navigating anti-Blackness and education privatization, it works well for the course.

What about for high schoolers?

There are many books I think every high school student could read, but one that had a profound impact on me was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. This was not assigned to me in high school (though it should have been), but I came to it on my own and through my dad. It was formative for my understanding of race/racism, America, power, politics, and religion. It's a text that I returned to in college and graduate school, and it always makes me think about personal transformation and the truths of race in America. I think it's important for high school students to read a book that makes them question EVERYTHING, and this book did that for me.

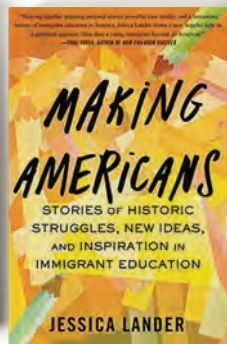




Child Psychology in Twelve Questions

By Professor Paul Harris
(OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS)

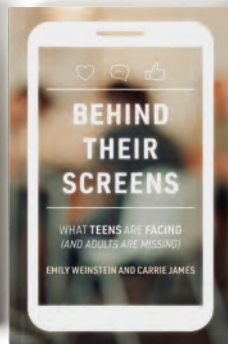
Written for the general reader who wants to learn about the field of developmental psychology and based on an intro course Professor Paul Harris has taught at the Ed School for more than 20 years, *Child Psychology* is a straightforward look at what Harris considers to be some of the most enduring questions in child psychology. “This is a somewhat idiosyncratic introduction to the psychology of the child,” Harris writes, “not an exhaustive overview: Rough Guide, rather than Michelin.” Each chapter focuses on one question and includes research related to the topic and discussions of why Harris finds the question important. Harris also addresses the uncertainties that continue to linger around the various questions, such as do children actually live in a fantasy world? How do they learn words? And, can we trust children’s memory?



Making Americans: Stories of Historic Struggles, New Ideas, and Inspiration in Immigrant Education

By Jessica Lander,
Ed.M.'15
(BEACON PRESS)

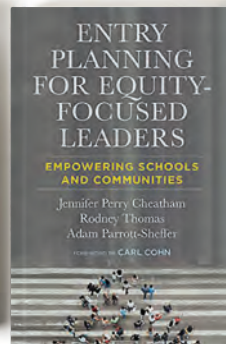
As a teacher in a diverse high school north of Boston, where her students come from more than 30 countries, Jessica Lander’s work has centered on a fundamental question: How do we ensure that immigrants feel safe, supported, and valued, and with the chance to put down roots and build futures so they can become full participants in their new home? In an effort to see how other educators approached this question, Lander set out across the country, sitting in on classes and hearing stories. She also asked some of her former students to tell her about their journeys to the United States and their evolving understanding of their place in America. Lander also weaves in key historical moments that have shaped immigrant education.



Behind Their Screens: What Teens Are Facing (and Parents Are Missing)

By Emily Weinstein,
Ed.M.'14, Ed.D.'17, and
Carrie James, Project
Zero Research Associate
(MIT PRESS)

One of the first questions authors Emily Weinstein and Carrie James ask in their new book is, “What are teens actually doing on their smartphones?” The common assumption is that they’re wasting time and missing out on the real world. But that’s not necessarily the case. Drawing on a multiyear project that surveyed more than 3,500 teens, the authors say that young people are continuously trying to figure out how to navigate the complicated, networked world they have grown up in. They need empathy, not exasperated eye-rolling. As *Publishers Weekly* said in their review of the book, “The authors’ research is impressive. ... Parents and educators losing sleep over what’s happening online would do well to give this a look.”



Entry Planning for Equity-Focused Leaders: Empowering Schools and Communities

By Senior Lecturer Jennifer Cheatham; Rodney Thomas; and Adam Parrott-Sheffer, Ed.M.'09
(HARVARD EDUCATION PRESS)

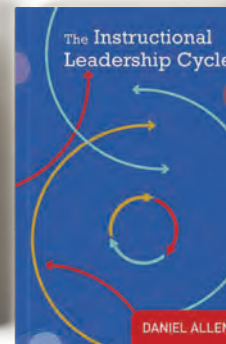
For Jennifer Cheatham, one of the most important lessons she learned during her career as a district leader was the need for intentional planning when new school and community leaders “entered” their jobs, especially those committed to equity. Beginnings matter, she says, and thought-out steps taken during the first few months on the job build trust and help new leaders gain important insights into the community where they will be working. Being intentional also creates a strong foundation for an equitable transformation within a system. Geared toward practitioners such as superintendents, principals, and project managers, *Entry Planning* offers case studies, interviews, toolkits, and exercises that will help new leaders start out on the right foot.



Everyone Wins!: The Evidence for Family-School Partnerships and Implications for Practice

By Anne Henderson; Senior Lecturer Karen Mapp; Stephany Cuevas, Ed.M.'15, Ed.D.'18; Martha Franco, Ed.M.'15; and Suzanna Ewert, Ed.M.'21
(SCHOLASTIC PROFESSIONAL)

As the title of this new book makes clear and decades of evidence confirm, when schools actively engage families in their student’s education, everyone wins. Student achievement goes up, families feel more connected and heard, and teachers and other educators can do their jobs better and reach students where they are. With a sharp focus on equity and written by leaders in the family-school world, *Everyone Wins* is both a practical, easy-to-use guidebook and action plan for schools and districts wanting to better support family-school partnerships, and a readable roundup of the latest research on what it truly means for teachers and other educators at schools to become partners with their families.



The Instructional Leadership Cycle

By Daniel Allen, Ed.M.'11; Foreword by Lee Teitel, Ed.D.'88
(HARVARD EDUCATION PRESS)

As author Daniel Allen explains in this, his first book, the instructional leadership cycle is a way to guide K–12 school leaders and teachers over the course of a school year toward transforming and improving their classrooms. The book is rooted, he says, in the idea that as our modern society grows more complex, students must develop more sophisticated analytical and problem-solving skills if they want to be successful. In order for schools to meet this challenge, school leaders need to move beyond just strategic planning and instead develop a vision for their school and then set that vision in motion. As Allen notes, schools need to be in “the business of learning” — they need to adapt to changes, analyze their own actions, and learn to identify gaps and problems that get in the way of both teaching and learning.



Don't Stop the Press

As HEP celebrates 20 years of service,
we take a look inside “the real work” of
university presses

Story by **Lory Hough**

Illustration by **Eleanor Shakespeare**

WALK INTO THE offices of Harvard Education Press (HEP) on Story Street in Cambridge, just down the road from the post office and the main Ed School campus, and here's what you won't find: course catalogs or recruitment material for the admissions office. Class packets or boxes of this magazine. You definitely will not come across a printing press.

What you will find are paperback books. Lots of them, dating back two decades to when H-E-P, as it's known, first became a university-based publishing house with a very specific goal: to publish books — and only books — informed by education research but aimed at people working in the trenches, people like teachers, principals, superintendents, and policy leaders who need access to new and credible strategies and ideas.

You'll also find a new leader — Jess Fiorillo, a veteran in the publishing world who knew when she was 15 years old, working as a summer intern at Yale University Press, that her life was going to revolve around books.

"I had an unpaid internship with the marketing department," she says. "There were stacks of articles and reviews that had been

torn out of various publications and my job was to paste them onto pieces of paper and file them in the correct author files. I fell in love with the whole atmosphere, which was mostly a messy jumble of books, papers, and editors."

It's an atmosphere that has been duplicated at hundreds of universities around the world that also support an academic book publishing group.

What's interesting, though, is despite the fact that the oldest university press dates back to the 1500s — the 1500s! — many people don't even realize this type of book publisher even exists.

So what exactly are university presses and why do they matter?

That's the Question

We know that university presses tend not to be household names, at least in the same way that big commercial "trade" book printers like HarperCollins or Houghton Mifflin are, but they perform many of the same tasks. They find authors and develop story ideas, edit copy and design covers, work with printers, and market and sell their creations. But unlike commercial presses, which are prof-

it-driven and appeal to broader audiences, university presses tend to publish scholarly and literary books for smaller audiences of specialists. Driven by missions, these nonprofits are often extensions of their parent universities: Harvard Education Press at the Ed School, Syracuse University Press, Amherst College Press, SUNY Press, to name just a few.

According to the Association of University Presses, there are actually about 158 university presses in their membership pool that publish more than 12,000 titles each year. In the history of university presses, HEP is relatively new, especially compared to Cambridge University Press, which published its first book in 1584, making it the oldest publishing house in the world. Oxford University Press began publishing just a few years later and is the largest university press with more than 6,000 employees in 50 countries. (By comparison, HEP has about 12 employees.) Harvard University Press (not the same as HEP), started in 1913 and has published blockbusters such as Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* and the Loeb Classical Library series.

These presses play an import-

ant, but not always understood role. As *Publisher's Weekly* noted in a story called "The Real Work of University Presses," they "seek out niche subjects, overlooked authors, and underappreciated fields of inquiry in order to help shine a light on new or different ideas and experiences for readers."

New books at HEP, for example, expose the systematic dismissal of Black educators from public schools and analyze trans studies in K-12 education. Other university presses have long published in areas such as climate science, LGBTQ studies, the #MeToo movement, and the struggle for racial justice. "Mission-driven university presses have the ability to go where trade houses sometimes cannot," the *Publisher's Weekly* article noted, "focusing on the social, cultural, intellectual, or even local importance of works rather than primarily on their economic potential."

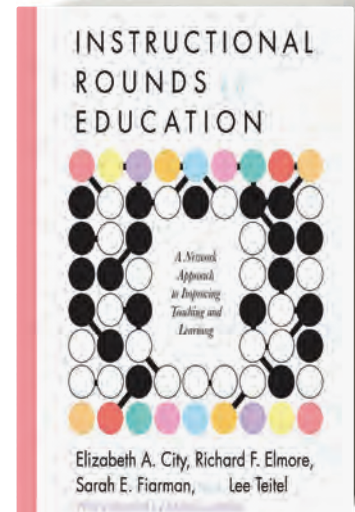
As Kenneth Arnold, the former director of Rutgers Press said in a 1985 story in *The New York Times* about university presses, "the bottom line is service. How have we served academia? How have we enhanced the reputation of the university?"

Jess Fiorillo, executive director of Harvard Education Publishing Group, which includes Harvard Ed Press



Top 10 at 20

Take a look at Harvard Ed Press's bestselling titles.



1

It's this focus on mission that partly drew Fiorillo to HEP.

"The authors here are fabulous. The list of titles is amazing, but the overarching most important thing to me was the mission," she says. "My whole career in publishing has been about education, about building titles that make it easier for teachers to teach and students to learn. And I focused in the higher ed markets. I've also worked in the high school markets, but this was an opportunity to influence education from K through higher ed and beyond, but also policy. Our mission is to really influence the conversation in education policy and practice. And to me, that was just an extension of everything that I have spent my career doing and an opportunity to do that at a different level."

After interning at Yale, Fiorillo worked at privately held and publicly traded commercial presses (John Wiley and Sons, Macmillan, and Harcourt Brace College Publishers), and at another university press (Oxford). Now, as the executive director (since June 2022) at Harvard Education Publishing Group (HEPG), which oversees Harvard Education Press, she sees firsthand how different it is

for a book publisher to be driven by service, as opposed to always being accountable to the bottom line and to shareholders.

"University presses are the diametrically opposed business model, right?" she says. "We obviously have a responsibility to be financially successful, but we have a bigger responsibility to broaden the academic community's exposure to research and information."

Of course, not every university press has the same bottom line. A good percentage of university presses are supported financially by their parent institutions and a few of the larger operations bring in revenue that help support their parent institutions.

"At HEPG, we have to break even every year: our expenses can't exceed the revenue we bring in," she says.

With this dual bottom line — striving to make money, but also to make an impact — Fiorillo says some university presses will be profitable and some will not, "and university presses are okay with that. ...As a mission-driven university press, it might be okay for me to publish a title that is only going to sell 200 copies, whereas a commercial press probably couldn't do

that." In fact, Fiorillo argues, university presses have a responsibility to publish small titles that are academically significant or present important research. "Even if we know they're not going to sell. That's just an important part of the role that we play." HEP typically publishes about 25 new titles a year, each ranging in sales from 200 to 8,000 copies annually. One of their goals looking to the future is to push that number to 35.

Know Your Audience

One way to reach that goal, Fiorillo says, is to double down on something important for every business — but especially university-based book publishers: know your audience.

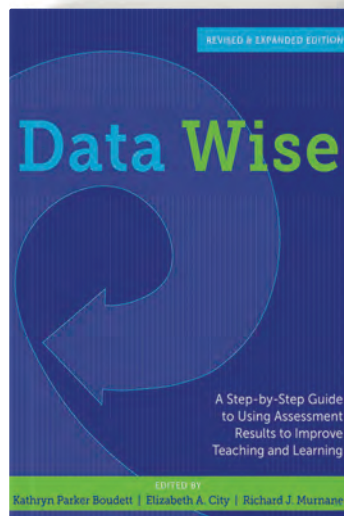
"Really understanding your customer is the secret to success in any business," Fiorillo says. "When you know your customer, you can deliver to them what they need, and in the best way for them to use it."

She says HEP has an "amazing foundation of authors and titles," and they are looking at ways to leverage those into new markets, "but there's also a shift," she says. "I think one of my short-term and

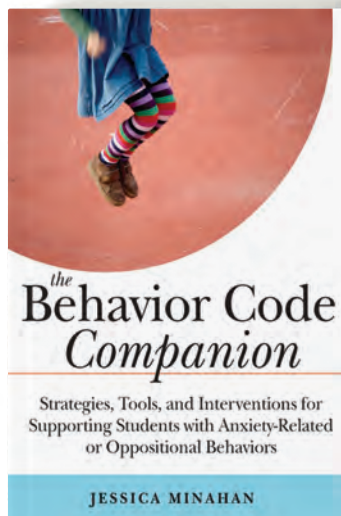
long-term goals being here is to develop a really deep understanding of who it is that we serve. Who is our audience? How can we understand our audience better? And then how can we deliver content to them? The content that we are doing such an amazing job of creating and producing — how can we then deliver that to them in ways that they need?"

This is especially important in education, she says, because the way teachers teach has been changing. "It's a fair guess to assume that the way that people are absorbing content is changing," she says. "And that's not a guess. We know that the way we absorb content is different. When you want to buy a book, you don't necessarily walk down the street to the bookstore. You hop online and see where you can purchase it. From the publisher or from Amazon? If you want to learn to knit, you could go to a bookstore and buy a book that will teach you how to knit. But probably you're going to go to YouTube and find a knitting tutorial, right? That is an example from my own life. That's what I did in COVID."

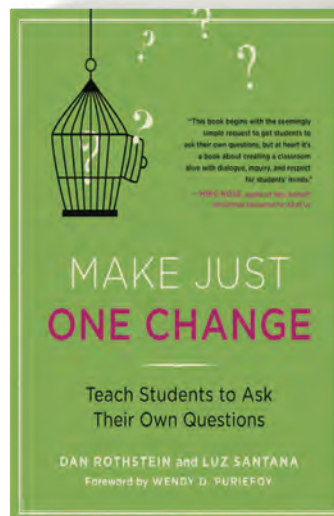
Many of HEP's books already include online supplements like



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teacher’s guides or “five tips” from authors. “We know teachers are incredibly busy. They are working around the clock. Teachers are phenomenal. How can we deliver content to them in a way that they can apply it practically and understand it quickly and easily? ... We have to be thinking about how we take content from the theoretical, which is what academics live in, to the practical.”

Video is another key supplement HEP will focus more on.

“Video and video consumption are changing the world,” Fiorillo says. “They are changing the way we all do everything. And that’s a big opportunity for us. ... There are all kinds of things we can do that help us make the experience easier and better for the user, help reach our audience with our message, and help us better deliver on our mission.”

Part of that mission includes serving not just readers, but also their authors, who include (but are not restricted to) Ed School faculty and alumni. Fiorillo says their small editorial team works closely with writers, in ways that big publishers often can’t.

“Our authors are the heart and soul of the publishing house. We

have a small editorial team, small but mighty is what I keep saying,” she says. “They work very closely with authors on manuscript development. And it shows in the end results. If you look at the revenue that the press brings in—that sort of qualifies us as a certain size of press—we publish fewer titles than other presses that are in the same revenue bracket. So each individual title that we publish is outperforming the industry. And that’s because of our authors, but it’s also the editorial team. It’s easy in publishing to get absorbed in the business side of publishing and to think of titles as product. I’ve worked at publishers where titles have been called product and it makes my skin crawl.”

Also unique in the university press world, including at HEP, is that each title is carefully reviewed by others in the field.

“It varies title by title a little bit,” says Fiorillo, “but every title is peer-reviewed. We also have an amazing editorial advisory board, which is made up of HGSE faculty. That is a crucial step in our publishing process. When we get in a proposal, the proposal is reviewed and our editorial staff may work with the author to re-

fine it. Then it goes to the editorial advisory board for approval.” The board, chaired by Professor Jal Mehta, meets four times a year. “They provide feedback. They provide comments. They look at the peer review comments and they look at how authors have responded to the peer review comments.”

Senior Lecturer Carrie Conaway currently serves on the advisory board. She says her past work experience is partly what she brings to the table.

“I worked in a practice setting until just three years ago, so what I can contribute to the board is some perspective on what policymakers and practitioners want out of HEP,” she says. “What topics might they want to read about? What might be too academic or not relevant to the challenges and opportunities the field faces? Obviously I can’t speak for all educators, but hopefully I can at least give some sense of how different books might be received.”

When Conaway wanted to publish her own book in 2020, *Common-Sense Evidence: The Education Leader’s Guide to Using Data and Research* with Nora Gordon, she says HEP absolutely was

her first choice.

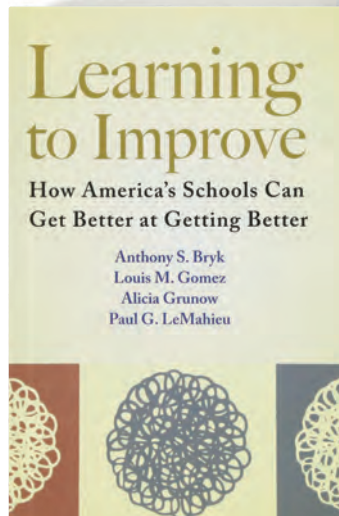
“No other publisher offers as many books aimed squarely at reaching an educator audience,” she says. “And HEP also had success with books like *Data Wise* that are related to our topic, how to build and use evidence from research in education settings.”

It’s also why **RICK HESS, ED.M. ’90**, a senior fellow and director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, has published more than 20 books with HEP.

“Working with Harvard Education Press has been integral to my work,” he says. “An elite education press like HEP has a feel for the issues, the audience, and the context that simply isn’t practical at a commercial house, where education is a small cog in a huge machine.”

It’s why he recommends university presses to fledging writers.

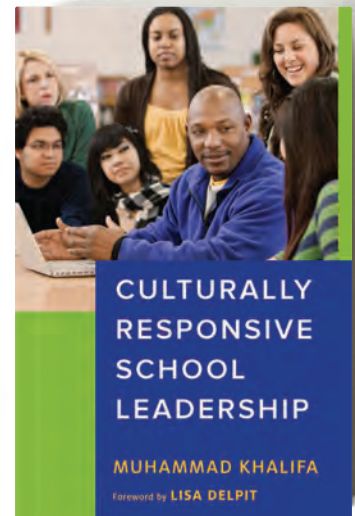
“I always explain to young education authors that we’re generally not penning airport fare or beach reads,” he says. “Unless we’re working on a jeremiad, we’re mostly writing for a sophisticated community of practitioners, leaders, advocates, and involved parents—and an elite



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education press understands that and approaches the editorial and marketing process accordingly.”

Bumps in the Road

There are challenges. For any book publisher — trade or university — there are the usual issues, like inconsistent revenue and changing reader demands. There are also university press-specific challenges, such as a decrease in library sales as libraries bring in fewer dollars. “Many libraries aren’t purchasing print books at all,” says Fiorillo, “only eBooks.”

But these days, at HEP and elsewhere, the biggest challenges are the practical ones. Although book sales across the publishing industry did surprisingly well during the past few years of COVID and at least 172 indie bookstores opened in 2021, other pandemic-triggered issues have made the nuts and bolts of getting books published tough.

“It’s safe to say things are a little more complicated,” said Jim Milliot, editorial director of *Publishers Weekly*, at a March 2022 webinar about the state of the publishing industry.

Fiorillo says, “The biggest challenges, honestly, for us and for everyone, are the increased costs of paper, the supply chain issues, and the price of gas, which is impacting trucks taking books from the printer to the warehouse or flying or shipping books and getting them into warehouses.”

It’s also hard getting press time, she says. “COVID really took a hit on the staffs at the trucking companies and printers and a lot of the manual labor that is part of the publishing process. And so, there are staff shortages, there are inflationary costs, and there’s simply transport of materials that’s really driving up costs.”

As a result, most printers are prioritizing first-run printings right now, and deprioritizing reprints. “Reprints is a struggle,” she says. At HEP, some of their workarounds include better use of eBooks and print on demand, which has decreased in price and increased in quality, and allows small publishers like HEP to easily print smaller runs or even just one book for a customer.

Luckily, one challenge HEP hasn’t had to face is declining revenue from their parent institution — a novelty in that world. Accord-

ing to the Association of University Presses, about two-thirds of university presses receive some level of funding from their parent organization and that funding, for many, has decreased. HEP has always been completely financially independent, Fiorillo says.

This independence, combined with the issues getting printed books out into the world, makes it a prime time, she says, for HEP to think about new possibilities.

“Every challenge, the flip side is that it’s an opportunity,” she says. “The shift to digital is a big one. It just requires thinking a little bit differently about how you’re publishing and how you’re selling and delivering, and different partnerships for distribution of eBooks. It’s just another layer. In our case, it’s much less of a financial challenge than I had anticipated, because I really thought that there would be a bigger price differential, but there really isn’t. For us, it’s really just a challenge in distributing those eBooks.”

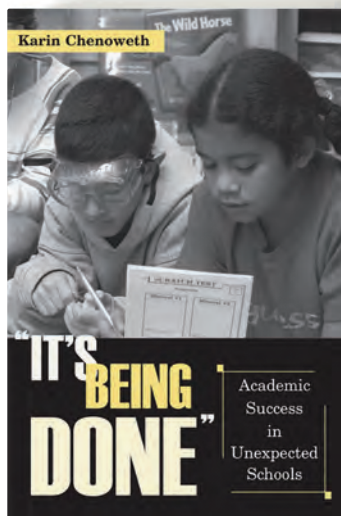
The Future Looks...

Is HEP then at a crucial turning point? What about university presses in general?

“Turning point may not be the right phrase,” says Fiorillo. “We are at a launching point. We have an incredible base of exceptionally performing titles and highly respected authors. And we see opportunities for getting those titles into more hands, spreading the word, and getting the good work out there, by pursuing new and different marketing and sales channels and partnerships. HEP has been around for 20 years. It’s been pursuing this mission ... But this is an organization that is poised to take a next step.”

The same seems to be true of the university press world overall. Annette Windhorn, external communications manager at the Association of University Presses, says the rate of new academic presses being founded by universities and colleges around the world is promising, as new press startups outpace the rate of press closure.

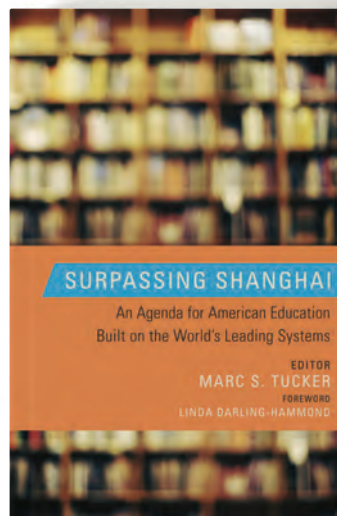
“There have been six presses since 2012 where defunding or closure was considered or announced publicly, but ultimately reversed,” Windhorn says. “The last full university press closures happened more than 10 years ago.” □



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Go online to read an essay about HEP’s 20th anniversary by HEP publicist Rose Ann Miller: gse.harvard.edu/ed

Oversized Rugby Shirts, the Text, and 25 Years of Parallel Moments

An alum recounts her friendship with another graduate — Temple University's new president

Story by Jean Ramsden, Ed.M.'97



New Temple University president Jason Wingard with longtime friend Jean Ramsden

LAST SUMMER — that giddy time when vaccines were new and we thought the pandemic might be all over soon — I stood in my kitchen, phone in hand, and shouted so loud it scared some of the dinner guests gathered in the backyard. “It’s Jason Wingard!” I called to my husband. “He’s going to be president of Temple University!”

My beloved old grad school friend, the first Black president in the school’s history.

As vegetables sizzled on the stove, my mind flew back to another sunny afternoon. Harvard Square, 1996, the day before fall classes started.

Peruvian buskers playing bamboo flutes, drums, a charango. Punks, professors, and political activists milling around — or steering clear of — The Pit. Students gathering at the Square’s institutions: bagels at Bruegger’s, gin and tonics at Grendel’s, falafel and folk music at Club Passim. And then there was me, an overawed 22-year-old, speed-walking toward the Ed School’s Office of Career Services.

I slipped into the fluorescent-lit room to find that another student — a tall, skinny, serious-looking guy about my age with oval-shaped glasses and an oversized rugby shirt — had beaten me to the notebooks of internship listings. I rested my fingers on one he’d discarded while eyeing the one he hadn’t yet touched. “Getting a head start, too?”

He looked up, face stern but not unfriendly. “It’s something I learned from John Chaney.” He misread my surprise for confu-

sion. “Temple’s basketball coach. He taught camps and clinics for local kids. I went every year.”

“Yeah, I know who John Chaney is —” I began cautiously.

“Chaney preached preparation,” he said fiercely. “He taught us discipline and ethics. He modeled professionalism and excellence. You prepare today, with dedicated focus, so you’re positioned to win tomorrow.”

Wow, I thought. Very serious. Somewhat mischievously, but with a straight face, I said, “Sorry about ’88.” That was the year Duke and my own childhood idol, Greg Koubek, had knocked Temple out of the final four.

The young man stood up — and up and up, all 6’4” of him, was my guess, based on the guys I’d rowed with at Cornell — and gave me an unexpected grin, its size rivaled only by its warmth. “I’m Jason,” he said. “Coffee?”

As we walked down Mt. Auburn, Jason Wingard from Philadelphia and I compared notes with increasing delight. All the coincidences! He had also been a D1 athlete: Stanford for football and track. Our upbringings rhymed, too, with parents who worked in education and human resources. So maybe it’s no wonder we both ended up with an inclination to serve and a determination to create an egalitarian educational landscape — me through developing children’s edutainment and Jason by using educational technology to close the digital divide.

I left him that first afternoon sensing we were both sincere, compassionate idealists who

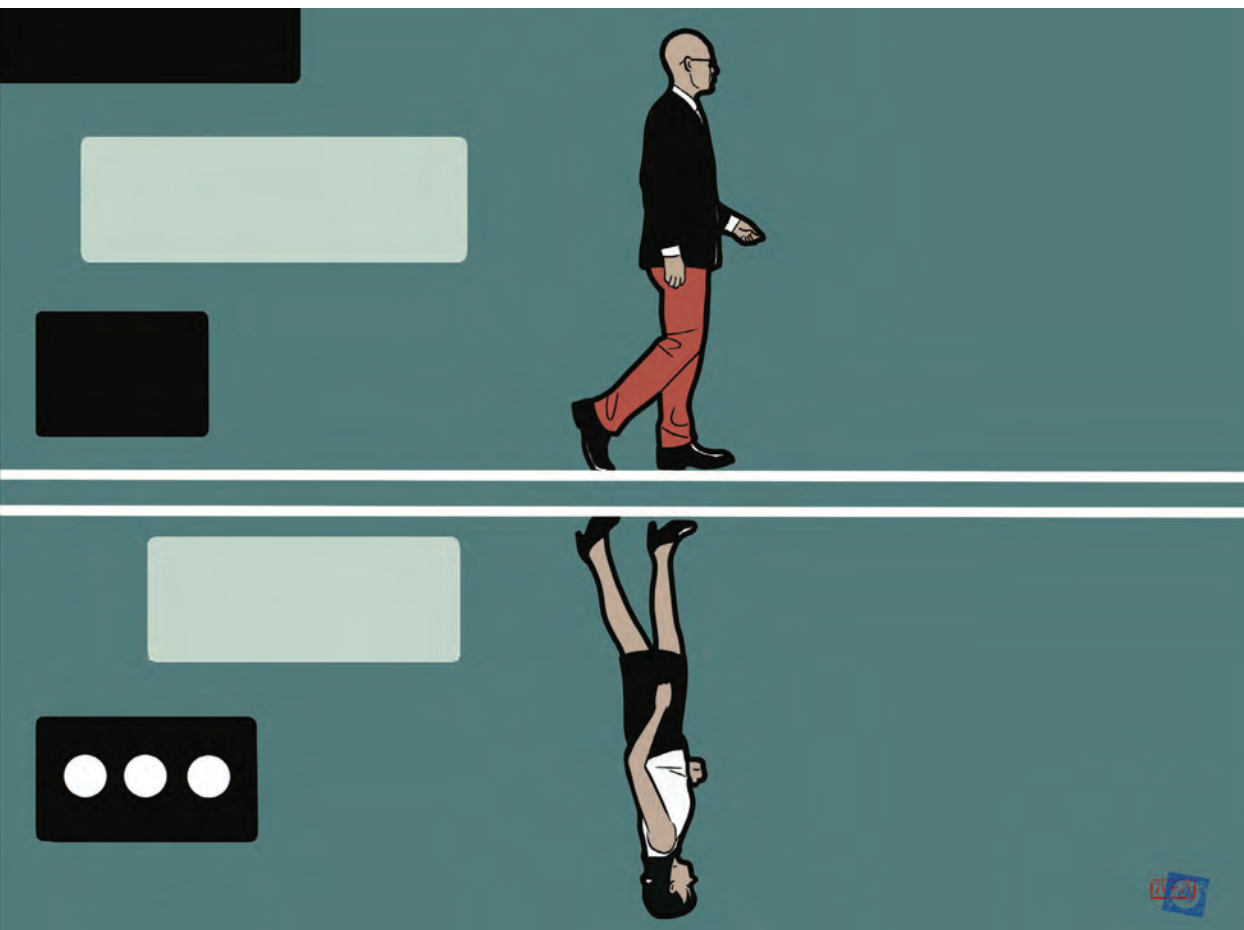
wanted equality. But while I was still working out the details, he had already identified specific methods like access, affordability, and leveling the playing field.

I would soon understand how rare a talent Jason was, because, without planning it, we shared most of our classes and ended up doing most of our projects together. I quickly found he was a visionary thinker and pragmatic leader with more focus and determination than I’d ever encountered. Our unconventional ideas made us stand out from our older, more experienced cohort. Once we designed a potential talk show for teen girls — *Sassy* magazine-meets-*The Oprah Winfrey Show*-meets-Boys Town — that supported authentic dialogue and, ultimately, empowerment. Man, did we get pushback: Too edgy. Too feminist. Too altruistic. Way too uneconomical.

But we didn’t mind. Challenging the status quo built our confidence, and we always had each other’s backs.

Outside of school, Jason and I rarely saw each other. I worked three jobs at The Greenhouse, Gutman Library, and John Harvard’s Brewery. Jason was busy producing short urban documentaries about issues like racism and poverty. He was also trading tips with a pair of equally bold up-and-coming talents: Matt Damon and Ben Affleck, who were in Cambridge filming *Good Will Hunting*.

By the following spring, soon after the infamous April Fool’s Day blizzard dumped three feet of snow in 48 hours, the ground



had thawed and so had some of our wide-eyed naivety. Jason and I shared day-old muffins at 1369 Coffee House and talked next steps. I'd decided against the Peace Corps, and I would be joining Price Waterhouse's entertainment, media, and communications consulting practice in New York. They had a few educational media clients; I had a ton of student loans. Jason had hit pause on his doctoral plans and was headed to California to manage Silicon Graphics' global education. The way his brown eyes brightened at the edges, his assured tone — I could tell how confident he felt in the decision. It would take me much longer to have that kind of unshakeable belief in myself.

Skip ahead to 2014, when I visited New York for the first time since 9-11. I caught up with now Dr. Wingard (Ph.D. from University of Pennsylvania) over lunch near the World Trade Center Memorial. His glasses were small-

er, and his rugby shirt had been replaced by a fancy suit, but he still looked as serious as ever and his warmhearted smile hadn't changed. The ease with which we fell right back into vulnerable conversation ... it felt like being wrapped in a hug.

We quizzed each other as old friends do. After a career at several startups and nonprofits, plus Wharton and Stanford, Jason was now Goldman Sachs' chief learning officer. And he lit up when he told me how he'd reconnected with his old Temple basketball mentor at Walnut Lane Golf Club, where Coach Chaney used to "hold court," telling stories and offering him advice.

Strangely, our lives had remained somewhat in parallel over those 17 years: we had both taught college, written books, and run leadership companies with our spouses. His father and my mother had pursued doctorates at Temple before completing

their degrees elsewhere. We had nine children between us.

Six years later, in March 2020, we met again at the Fitler Club in Philadelphia. We'd both been drawn back to our Harvard ideals. I was writing children's books and, nearing the end of his tenure as dean of Columbia University's School of Professional Studies, Jason was starting a venture capital edtech fund for companies disrupting the educational industry.

And only a year later, I got *The Text* and was shouting with joy from my kitchen. Temple University had meant so much to Jason over the years. Who could have guessed that childhood connection would one day come to this astonishing fruition in such a historic fashion?

When I met him, Jason was a daring visionary who got things done, and that hasn't changed. To open the doors of his school — his school! — to anyone who wants higher education, he's adopting

a holistic admissions evaluation, working to make tuition affordable and planning a bold fundraising campaign that will benefit a more diverse group of prospective students. To ensure Temple graduates are prepared for good jobs, he's pushing the curriculum toward skills like data science, logistics management, and digital arts. And he's investing in research and grant opportunities that will allow the university and its faculty to advance fields of inquiry across disciplines. To amplify Temple's engagement with Philadelphia, he's deepening ties with North Philly's impoverished residential population as well as the city's corporate communities, civic leaders, and athletics fans, plus half a million alumni and donors worldwide.

Given Temple's size (almost 38,000 students), and its mission of access and inclusion, Jason believes the university can become a pioneer in higher ed — the leader in preparing the workforce of the future. The presidential role is an ambitious undertaking, but he's prepared. Coach Chaney was right: "You prepare today, with dedicated focus, so you're positioned to win tomorrow." □

Jean Ramsden, Ed.M.'97, has more than 25 years of experience as a communication specialist, project manager, and producer in the entertainment and education industries

ObservEd.

MAY 26, 2022

Commencement: Class of 2022

The Ed School community came together on the last Thursday of May for Harvard's first in-person commencement in three years to celebrate the hard work of 1,016 graduating students. "You came here today because of your passion for improving education," said Dean Bridget Terry Long in her speech to students and families. "You — let me rephrase that — we represent the entire education ecosystem, and together that is an impressive force for good."



JILL ANDERSON



MAY 28, 2022

Commencement: Classes of 2020 and 2021

COVID forced graduates from the classes of 2020 and 2021 to have online Zoom commencement ceremonies. This past spring, just two days after Harvard's commencement for the class of 2022, those graduates came to campus — some for the first time — for the chance to hear their names called and walk across the stage for a special, in-person commencement under the tent behind Longfellow Hall. The following day, the 2020 and 2021 grads gathered in Harvard Yard for the full graduation exercises.

HOMECOMING 2022



MAY 20-22, 2022
Homecoming

Online Ed.M. students from the classes of 2021 and 2022 came to Cambridge for an immersive campus weekend to celebrate and learn from one another. For many of these students, Homecoming was also the first time they had ever visited Cambridge. The three-day event included faculty presentations and workshops, tours across Harvard, game night, karaoke, and a Homecoming formal at the Copley Plaza in Boston.



Practice



“We thought this would be a pretty accessible way to start the talk and to see a few small things that you could start doing to make change.”

AIMEE CORRIGAN, ED.M.'11, ON THE FILM SHE CO-PRODUCED
WITH **JUSTIN REICH, ED.D.'12** (SEE P. 46)



Is It Better to Ask Questions or Listen Carefully?

New study looks at what really sparks curiosity and learning

Story by **Lory Hough**



Associate Professor
Elizabeth Bonawitz

WHAT HAPPENS to learning and curiosity when some children are encouraged to ask questions and others to sit and listen carefully? That's what Associate Professor Elizabeth Bonawitz wanted to find out with a team of other educators and scientists when they followed 103 children, ages 5 to 7, as they participated in a series of virtual science lessons over a two-week period. What they found, as detailed in a new paper published this summer, is that while curiosity might kill the cat, it actually helps children learn more — and value what they're learning. This past fall, Bonawitz spoke to *Ed.* about asking and listening, willingness-to-pay, and the million-dollar question.

One group was encouraged to ask questions and the other to listen carefully, correct?

Exactly. Before the first lesson, the child was told the purpose of the lessons, depending on which group they had been randomly assigned to before the study started. We told children: "I want you to get really good at [asking questions/listening carefully]. [Question asking/careful listening] is super important because [asking questions/listening] is an amazing way to learn about new, cool things! [Question asking/listening closely] is a great skill for you to use in school, and I want you to have a goal of becoming really good [question askers/listeners] so that we can be some of the best learners in the future!" This goal was reaffirmed at the start of each subsequent lesson.

What were the students learning about?

Each child had 10 different online sessions with us, so we saw them every day for two weeks. The topic lessons were designed to be consistent with the United States' Next Generation Science Standards for kindergarten, so they included topics like animal hibernation, camouflage, and building homes. Each lesson consisted of three parts: a story from a book, a video, and an activity. For example, in the animal-plant systems lesson, child-teacher pairs read a story about honeybee homes, watched a video about how bees make honey, and then made "honey" themselves with cornstarch and water.

How did you measure what they learned?

A new experimenter, who didn't know which intervention the children had been assigned, tested children on their content knowledge from the training — both information that was directly taught and generalized knowledge that they might have developed. They also showed children a new picture of an animal and asked them how many questions they could think of to ask about it. Finally, we gave children a generalized measure of science curiosity called "willingness-to-pay"; we showed them a picture of a video they could watch and asked if they wanted some stickers or to watch the video. If they wanted to watch the video, we increased

the "pot" of stickers until they switched to preferring the stickers. If they wanted the stickers, we decreased the "pot" until they switched to preferring the video. This gave us a "value" measure children put on new science information (the video).

What did you learn?

I was expecting children in the question training to ask a lot more questions in the follow-up task and was hoping they might show some improvement of knowledge and some improvement of generalized curiosity/interest in science content as measured by the "willingness-to-pay" task. We did not see strong evidence that the question asking training taught children to simply ask more questions: Children in the question-asking condition did not ask more questions about a novel animal than children in the listening condition. However, we found a whopping effect on "willingness-to-pay." Children in the question-asking training were willing to pay many more stickers for new science content than children in the careful listening condition. We also found that children in the question-asking condition gained marginally more science knowledge than the careful listeners. Furthermore, practice with question-asking was more beneficial for children with lower baseline knowledge, suggesting that question-asking shows promise for enhancing children's motivation to learn and equalizing academic disparities.



Kids naturally ask questions, sometimes nonstop, but you mention that scientific curiosity in elementary school typically decreases over time. Why does this happen?

This is a great question. There are many possible hypotheses on the table. One is that many teachers and schools are forced to focus on teaching and testing rote facts, rather than focusing on the *process* of discovery and the causal mechanisms that explain the processes. It's hard to develop large-scale standardized tests that measure processes of discovery, so it's understandable that the focus has become to teach to the test. Further, people might mistakenly believe that young children are not capable of understanding causal mechanisms, but this kind of knowledge is accessible to preschoolers (and possibly younger) and supports abstract reasoning and intuitive theory building. The mind

is naturally predisposed to get reward from building models of the world, but there is not a lot of reward in memorizing facts. So this focus in U.S. schools on facts over discovery might quash curiosity. Second, teachers and parents have agendas and limits on time — this requires stopping the endless questions to focus on the “test” information — and so children might learn this kind of searching is not valuable. Third, many teachers and parents find science intimidating so they might, unintentionally, model fear or avoidance around these topics, which could be absorbed by children. Finally, curiosity is sparked by uncertainty, but many schools believe there is a “right answer” and that teachers must always appear knowledgeable. By not modeling intellectual humility and noting our own uncertainty about the world, we pass these curiosity-killing beliefs onto children.

How do teachers balance encouraging questions with keeping kids on task?

Well, this is the million-dollar question. How do we foster a continued love of learning and empowerment with the fact that we are limited in our time and topics? Even in our own study, we found that more questions is not necessarily better. In our study, children in the question-asking condition who asked more questions during the training did not outperform children who asked less in the same condition. Educators and psychologists have long talked about the importance of “quality” over “quantity” — and questions are likely no exception. Goren Gordon is a friend and brilliant roboticist also studying children's curiosity. He visits his children's school once a week and encourages children to ask questions. I believe he awards a point for every question asked; two points

for every question asked to which he doesn't know the answer; and three points for every question asked to which Google does not have an answer. The children love his visits and by the end of the school year are really thinking hard about what he's talking about to see if they can stump him. So, rewarding children for “quality” might be one tool that gets kids engaging their wonder and still keeps classrooms focused on topics at hand.

Overall, why are questions important?

For teachers and parents, questions help the teacher see where confusions are arising to allow more effective lesson building. But questions can also build interest, curiosity, and even support learning directly. For example, questions can empower the student to take ownership over their own learning, which might result in further interest outside the classroom. Questions are a great way for students to practice thinking about the broader connection of what they are learning. Questions also help a learner identify areas where they still have uncertainty and require resolution. Questions are a means of “learning by thinking” — by framing knowledge as a question, learners help focus their own thinking. They may highlight conflicts in thinking, which is a necessary step towards conceptual change. In this way, simply asking a question might help a learner discover an answer they didn't know they had all along!

Is it Time to Rethink Recommendation Letters?

(Hint: The answer is yes.)

Story by Lory Hough



Ph.D. student Tara Nicola

IT'S THAT TIME of the year, when high school students applying to college are asking their guidance counselors for recommendation letters. The letters are meant to round out a student's application package and help colleges better understand students beyond their grades and test scores.

The problem, as Ph.D. student Tara Nicola found in her new research, is that there's little understanding of whether these letters are actually providing admission officers with the information they need — and whether the letters, which can directly influence whether a student is admitted or not to a college — are equitable.

"There exist very few studies — I can count them on one hand! — that look at recommendation letters for undergraduate admissions and none that have analyzed counselor letters specifically or that have examined recommendation letters on a national scale," Nicola says. "My research fills a large gap in the literature about recommendation letters used in the college admissions process."

Nicola began looking at counselor letters from around the country written for a huge batch of students: 630,000 across 18,000 schools. Using language software, she analyzed the letters to see what was being written, the similarity of letters, and key themes and words used.

Preliminary results often found bias in the language used, particularly the adjectives used to describe gender or race. Female

students, for example, are often described as "caring."

Nicola also wondered, when analyzing the data, whether counselors were using the same letter as a template over and over again. She found that this did often happen — one counselor reused a letter 300 times — partly because most are too busy to customize each one.

"Often it comes down to caseload size. If a counselor has 400 students on their caseload, and the majority of those students are applying to a four-year college that requires a counselor letter, that counselor might be tasked with submitting more than 200 letters," she says. "Not only is it impossible for these counselors to fully know each of those 200-plus students, but also there are not enough hours in the day to write 200-plus detailed letters on top of their normal counseling responsibilities."

Although Nicola understands why this happens, she says it's a problem that needs to be fixed.

"Honestly, the reality is that many counselors may not have a choice but to submit a form letter if they have many letters to write and don't know their students well," she says. "We need systemic change at the school level for this issue to be fixed. I don't think counselors want to submit form letters — they know that writing personalized letters requires knowing a student well and/or being able to gather a lot of information about a student from individuals (whether inside or outside the school) who can

vouch for the student. Unfortunately, that often is not possible."

The result, when generic form letters are sent, "is a missed opportunity to share critical information about an applicant that might have affected how an admissions officer considers an applicant," she says.

One workaround, if a counselor can't write a personalized letter about a student, is to submit a letter that still provides rich context about the school itself.

"Building on information from the high school profile can be incredibly helpful," she says. "Information about the school and the types of students it enrolls, its course offerings, and where students typically go to college — 2-year or 4-year — is important information for admissions officers to know. The reality is that admissions officers do not know most schools in their territories, so that context information about the high school is very valuable."

Long-term, Nicola would like to see the guesswork taken out of writing letters, with schools helping counselors gather more information about students ahead of time. Better training for tasks like these would also help. (Few counselors, she found, ever learn how to specifically write letters in college or grad school, despite their importance.) Nicola also thinks the recommendation letter form itself could be revamped. Instead of having the content be open-ended — tell us about this student — letters could answer specific questions that each college really wants to know.



Three Specific Things School Counselors Can Do To Avoid Bias When Working On Recommendation Letters for Students

- ▶ **Carefully review the language in letters to ensure it is not being used in systematically gendered or racial ways. There are a number of free online calculators that can specifically identify use of gendered language in a piece of text. One calculator is tomforth.co.uk/genderbias/.**
- ▶ **Be careful not to invoke stereotypes, such as focusing on the “caring” nature of female applicants or stating that an applicant’s performance exceeds expectations given their background.**
- ▶ **Keep track of letter length. Recommenders tend to write longer letters for male applicants than females. Letter length can be as much an indication of support for an applicant as letter content.**

Reel-World Education

A new documentary captures teachers creating more equitable classrooms

Story by **Grace Tatter, Ed.M.'18**

Illustrations by **James Graham**







Still shots from *We Have to Do Something Different* (above and following spreads), written and produced by Aimee Corrigan and Justin Reich (below)

WHEN FILMMAKER **AIMEE CORRIGAN, ED.M.'11**, flew to California to gather the final footage for a new documentary about equity and education, the novel coronavirus was already ubiquitous in the news, but it had not yet changed day-to-day life.

By the time she flew home, she was wearing a mask. Within days, schools were shuttered for in-person instruction. Classrooms would never look quite the same again.

Because of when the documentary was filmed — in 2019 and the early days of 2020 — *We Have to Do Something Different* has almost a dreamlike quality, with nary a blue surgical mask in sight.

But its message — about the journey some teachers are taking to make their classrooms more equitable — is timeless. If anything, Corrigan says, it is more urgent than ever.

Ready, Set, Action

We Have to Do Something Different is a production of MIT's Teaching Systems Lab, a project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology focused on the future of teacher learning that includes online classes and practice spaces for novice teachers through games and simulations. The lab is led by **JUSTIN REICH, ED.D.'12**. Corrigan and Reich first met at the Ed School,

where they both studied the intersection of education and technology. Later, they were fellows at Harvard's Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society. So when Reich needed a team to produce short video case studies for online courses he was developing for the lab, he reached out to Corrigan for help. Corrigan has spent much of her career working on documentary films that offer actionable solutions to social issues — a mission that dovetails with the lab's focus on praxis.

The pair ended up partnering on several courses, including one about equitable teaching practices, built on a foundation of research by Rich Milner, the chair of education of Vanderbilt University's Department of Teaching and Learning, and the author of *Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There*. (See page 33.)

For that course, Corrigan traveled across the country, identifying teachers who were trying to make their classrooms better places for all students to learn, and using that footage for modules throughout the course. The team scanned the lab's network for educators who were focused on equity and willing to let filmmakers into their classrooms.

"Our hope was that rather than just having teachers tell us in an interview about what they do, they could show us what they do in an actual teaching moment," Corrigan says.





After the course on equitable teaching practices was finished, Reich and Corrigan realized that they could repurpose the footage into a longer film. They brought in **DOUG PIERTZAK, ED.M.'11**, to help produce it. Piertzak is the founder of Fresh Cognate, an education media company focused on storytelling. He had partnered with Corrigan and the Teaching Systems Lab before and was excited to partner on a longer documentary.

“This project is the gem of longstanding partnerships, strong relationships formed at HGSE (and elsewhere), and common desires for the students, teachers, and schools now and into the future,” he says.

The result is a series of vignettes that allow the viewer to observe educators across the country enacting specific practices to help foster more equitable learning environments — from focusing on students as individuals, to making sure curricular materials represent all students, to facilitating conversations about real-world issues in the classroom. Scenes from lively lessons and discussions are threaded through with interviews with both educators and students, as well as narration from Reich, a feature that was added relatively late in the production process.

Originally, Corrigan wanted the scenes in schools to speak for themselves, without nar-

ration. But after an initial cut of the film, she and the team decided that the flip side of the imperative in the title — *We Have to Do Something Different* — was to make sure that educators walked away from the film with things that they *can* do differently. While all the schools featured are public schools, they exist in different contexts, with access to different resources and funding. The film doesn't ignore the bigger picture, or racism and structural inequities. To the contrary, it acknowledges the enormity of those problems, while still offering reasons for optimism. An individual educator or school cannot solve societal injustices in a day, Reich and Corrigan say. But there *are* things that they can begin doing immediately to address those injustices, which Reich's narration underscores.

The schools featured in the film are located in Boston, Florida, Indiana, and California, in both urban and suburban settings. Reich and Corrigan say they wanted to show that high-quality teaching is not just happening in schools in certain settings, or with certain resources.

“I think you could find a teacher in just about every school who's doing this kind of work,” Reich says. “If you want to have teachers adopt new practices, they have to see it. Not just to know what it looks like in practice,



but to be like, ‘Oh, that person who looks like me and is in a context like the one I’m in is doing this thing that seems foreign or difficult — and it’s kind of working.’”

Going Short

We Have to Do Something Different is not a feature-length documentary. It clocks in at around 35 minutes, just a little longer than an episode of a sitcom.

That meant painful decisions in the editing room. A lot of footage from schools had to be left on the cutting room floor. But keeping the documentary relatively short was important to the team, who wanted to differentiate the movie from the multi-week course it evolved from, for several reasons.

For one, Reich said he hopes that the shorter film will be a more accessible way to introduce educators to other offerings from the Teaching Systems Lab, including future online courses on equity and teaching. While self-paced online learning is not for everyone, Reich says, it offers exciting opportunities for teachers. The students who tend to get the most out of self-paced learning — where you’re not meeting with your classmates and teacher at the same time — tend to fit the teacher profile: already educated. And asynchronous online learn-

ing has a better chance at fitting into teachers’ busy schedules.

But there’s still the question of how to make sure they know about the lab’s course offerings — and that’s where the documentary comes in.

“We sort of have to think about bringing people in as kind of a funnel. You want free, no light-touch activities to get people interested in what we’re doing,” he says.

“We thought [*We Have to Do Something Different*] would just be a great way to reach people who didn’t have time to take a full course,” Corrigan says. “If they were captivated by the film, then they could take the course as the next step.”

Another rationale for making the film shorter is that educators can more easily share it with their colleagues.

“One of the things that we found in our research is that it’s relatively unusual for an entire school to sign up together to take one of our courses,” Reich says. “Part of our impact model is saying, how can we make it so people feel empowered to go back into their school community and share some of what they’ve learned?” Most of the time, if someone in an online course wants to share a single learning or takeaway from the course with their colleagues, it’s difficult.



“Like, if I was to send you a link to something that’s within that course, you’d be like, I gotta register for this thing,” says Reich. “And then there’s like a bunch of formatting around it and menus and stuff like that. I just wanted to see the thing.” Some of the footage from the documentary is also available in even shorter videos on YouTube.

And finally, the shorter length makes it perfect for professional development sessions.

All of the teachers at any given school are unlikely to take a course together — but they can watch a short film together. **SARA O’BRIEN, ED.M.’19**, is an instructional designer in the Teaching Systems Lab who collaborated on the documentary film. O’Brien spent most of her career as a classroom teacher, first as a teacher in independent schools, and then, after completing her masters at the Ed School, as an English language arts teacher in Newton Public Schools in Massachusetts. O’Brien says that, in part because of her experience in K–12 classrooms, she was very conscious of time constraints during the school week.

“You don’t have time for people to watch a 75-minute documentary and then have time to talk about it,” O’Brien says. “We really wanted to keep it manageable for PD sessions.”

The team has more than the film to offer school communities. O’Brien helped design a

screening toolkit that includes a facilitator’s guide, discussion slide deck, and a note taking tool that’s designed to help viewers organize their thoughts as they watch the documentary, as well as reflect on and discuss their learnings afterward. Dialogue, all along, has been one of the primary goals of the project.

“We tried to really keep it focused on, what are you seeing in the film? What are the small things that these teachers are doing, whether it’s an action or a mindset, that you could really adopt on your own?” O’Brien says. “What’s already happening in your school that you can build on?”

Corrigan says that as she was making the film, she pictured a teacher who was interested in equity, but who did not necessarily feel like they had a lot of support — a teacher who needed a tool to start a conversation with his or her colleagues.

“We thought this would be a pretty accessible way to start the talk and to see a few small things that you could start doing to make change,” she says.

Change in the World

We Have to Do Something Different focuses on the changes that educators can make that are within their domain. But of course, educators



are also responding to societal shifts far out of any individual's control — shifts that were on clear display in the months between filming and the release of the documentary. In addition to the pandemic, there were also massive protests against racism and police brutality, as well as political struggles over critical race theory, all of which resulted in sudden changes in education policy and curricula. Demand for materials about racial equity in education skyrocketed — and not all of the materials to meet that demand are substantive. O'Brien says she hopes that the project cuts through some of the buzz around equity and gets to the heart of it.

"People are throwing around words like equity and justice and social justice," O'Brien says. "But what does that actually mean? That was always the goal of the film: If I actually go into a classroom where a teacher believes in equity or in racial justice, what is actually happening on the ground? What is that teacher doing?"

As the world changed, so did the teachers and educators highlighted in the film. Ronni Moore was an instructional leader at Purdue Polytechnic High School in Indianapolis during filming. Today, she's the director of K-12 curriculum at Christel House Indianapolis, a local charter network. She's also pursu-

ing her master's in education at the High Tech High Graduate School of Education.

The pandemic brought the importance of relationship-building and students' humanity — a central tenet of *We Have to Do Something Different* — to the forefront, Moore says.

"Because students' home lives were more visible, what I saw was ... educators making more of an effort to connect with their students. Checking in with them and asking how are you doing before asking what are you doing, or have you done this, or did you do that?" she says.

Even when students returned to in-person instruction, it wasn't a return to how things were before the pandemic. Moore says that all of a sudden, things that used to seem important, like dress codes, seemed beside the point.

"There are a lot of compliance things [in schools], like, 'Make sure you're quiet in the hallways! Make sure you have your pencil when you come to school!' All of those things," Moore says. "We started having more conversations about things like, should we be policing students' bodies? If it doesn't have to do with learning, do we have to correct it?"

When Moore watched the finished documentary with other educators, a lot of the lessons resonated more than ever. But she also realized that her approach to equity has



even evolved since the filming took place. In the film, Moore discusses how trauma informs her approach as an educator, and how instead of asking what's wrong with a student, she asks what happened to them. Now, she says, she frames the question differently. She asks herself, what does each student carry? The question "what happened to you," Moore says, places the student in the place of the victim, while asking what someone carries offers more points for connection. "We all carry things," she says.

Her ethos of constant evolution is reflected across the film: the stories it portrays show that every day, we all can learn and grow and strengthen relationships, even while still acknowledging daunting problems at both the societal level and in our own lives.

Next Steps

Because of the pandemic, the roll-out of *We Have to Do Something Different* hasn't been what the team envisioned when they first dreamed up the project. The broader release of the film was delayed almost a year due to the pandemic, but the documentary is available for free screenings for educators. Corrigan says she wants to keep in conversation with educators around the film. (There's a contact

option on the website.) Something that excites her about her work with the Teaching Systems Lab is its focus on impact — a motive she honed at HGSE.

"It's become more and more important to me in my career to find out, does the stuff I make matter?" she says. "And I think HGSE made me really have a commitment to continuing to find innovative ways to engage with the audience and measure the impact of the communication."

The hope is that regardless of the large-scale societal changes yet to come, the documentary will remain a relevant tool for educators, and that its messages — about the importance of inclusion, and relationships — are timeless.

As long as there is inequity in schools, there will be a need to do something different. The film shows that every day, we can. □

Grace Tatter, Ed.M.'18 (gracetatter.com), is an education reporter and audio producer. Her last piece for *Ed.* looked at the battle over what history students learn in school

Watch a short trailer and download related teaching tools: somethingdifferentfilm.com

What I Learned about Why Students Don't Choose to Become Teachers

Just about everyone can point to a teacher who made a huge difference in their life. So why do we often seem to socialize college students, especially our “best and brightest,” to believe that they shouldn’t become K–12 teachers? This is what Lecturer **ZID MANCENIDO, PH.D.’22**, a former high school science teacher, wanted to figure out for his dissertation when he interviewed college seniors and recent graduates who were considering going into the teaching profession. Here are some of the things Mancenido learned about the signals undergraduates are receiving, the influence of family and friends, and why elevating alumni who teach may be beneficial.

When I asked academic high achievers why they think that their family, friends, and mentors may have discouraged them from thinking of teaching as a career path, some said that they thought others just wanted the best for them and teaching wasn’t good enough — whether because of low pay, or because they thought that it wasn’t well respected, or because it wasn’t cognitively demanding. Others thought that others expected more from them: to do something big and change the world rather than just “be a teacher.”

There’s some cognitive dissonance in how some people perceive teachers. On the one hand, teachers are incredibly important and make a huge difference to the lives of others, and on the other hand, they are not very well-respected, and it isn’t worth it for academic high-achievers to pursue it as a career. One participant talked about telling the teachers in their high school that they wanted to become a teacher but then hearing from them that they were “too smart” for that and should consider other more highly paid and prestigious careers.

Parents are highly influential in their

children’s career exploration and decision-making. They influence the opportunities that children have access to, and therefore the sorts of careers that they are exposed to and explore. Some parents also have a more directive influence, with some of my participants reporting that their parents explicitly approved or forbade them from choosing certain careers like teaching.

Peer effects are huge in career exploration and decision-making. Many participants mentioned that the first time they considered teaching as a career was when a peer told them that they were considering teaching. For example, one participant was in his first year of college and went to an after-class study group run by one of the teaching assistants who was a senior. After they finished the problem set, the conversation, inevitably, went to what the senior was planning to do after college. The senior responded that they were going to become a teacher. My participant said that this was the first time that he ever heard someone from that elite college talk about becoming a teacher; he didn’t even know it was a possibility until then.

So many people talked about how going to an elite educational context meant they felt like they needed to do something that was “worth” their degree. This meant that people often felt guilty that they were even considering education as a career.

One education professor at an elite liberal arts college once told me that the most common conversation they have with education majors is counseling students on how they can tell their parents that they’ve switched majors.

I think all researchers are motivated a little by challenges they’ve observed in their own life. I distinctly remember a few moments where I was explicitly told not to

become a teacher, and I was implicitly funneled towards other careers. But two things happened: One, I really didn’t know what I wanted to do as a career while I was in college — I was too busy “doing college” to think about what comes after; and two, I had a couple of really good friends who chose to do teaching, and it seemed like a perfectly fine thing to do as well, so I chose to teach!

When people choose careers, they’re not choosing between the universe of all careers possible. They choose between careers that they know about, that they’ve had exposure to, that they’ve had the opportunity to explore. No one chooses a career that they know absolutely nothing about. If we want more academic high-achievers to consider teaching as a career, we need them to have access to information about it.

No one makes the decision about whether or not to teach alone. It’s always social, whether with mentors, with peers, or with family. People talk and deliberate about their career decisions with others. If we want more academic high-achievers to want to choose teaching, we don’t just need to convince them that it’s a good decision; we need to convince their families, mentors, and friends too.

A few participants told me that they finally made the decision to teach when they visited a teacher preparation program and met their alumni. They loved meeting these people, people who they could see themselves become, people who were living lives that they could imagine living, people who they felt like they belonged with. There’s so much power in that feeling of seeing possibilities for your future in the flesh. □

If you know someone who would make a great teacher, check out our Teaching and Teacher Leadership Program at gse.harvard.edu/masters/programs/ttl



Zid Mancenido

PAST TENSE

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: *ALL* OF US



This past May, just after the shooting in Uvalde, Texas, left 19 students and two teachers dead and 17 others injured, JENNIFER HIBBARD, ED.M.'85, pulled out journals she kept when she was a public school teacher in Quincy, Massachusetts, from 1993 until 2019. She then wrote this story based on her school's first lockdown drill in 2012 after another school shooting — Sandy Hook. “Although sadly,” Hibbard says, “I truly did not need to refresh my memory.”

“Will my sneakers give us away?” sobbed the little voice near me. Amy’s light-up footwear was blinking with every nervous toe tap. I motioned for her to come and she quickly swapped her spot to squish next to me on the floor against the bookshelves.

My spot is ALWAYS closest to the door.

I hugged her and whispered, “No, they are beautiful ... gotta get me a pair of those!” She smiled and I wished I could hug each of my students in that moment as we crouched along the front of the room. The string of students pooled into the corner under the science table. I could see 24 pairs of eyes squarely on me.

They were second-graders jammed into the corner of my small classroom. A larger group than usual. We knew in advance lockdown procedures were this day: lockdown, fire drill, and reverse evacuation. We had our routine: lock the door, pull the shades, turn out the lights,

move a few desks, hide, and wait.

Wait for what?

The jiggle of the door handle.

I had explained to the seven- and eight-year-olds that this noise is our safety officer checking that we are safe and that he cannot see us through the glass or hear us.

Our minds and eyes wander. The outlines of sunlight around the six shades. The light reaching into us, comforting and calming. The dimly lit colorful posters. Our favorite is the photo of the hibernating bear slumbering unaware. Our clothesline displaying our Mother’s Day projects: large paper flowers with an oversized photo of each smiling face encircled by cupcake liners and colorful tissue paper, an original poem stapled to the bottom. Our Good Job Board showcasing exemplary behavior: “Teamwork Works” is our mantra. Our plastic shoe holder hanging from the closet door housing the children’s AOK notes — a daily act of kindness written to a classmate.

As teachers, we try to highlight the best of human nature.

Of course, we do.

I try to make eye contact with each child. With a smile and nod of my head, I attempt to relay my certainty that we are safe. All is well.

My arm firmly around Amy. Her feet now steady and quiet. I close my eyes knowing I would remember THIS lockdown drill.

Of course, I would.

We wait.

My mind drifts to my dear second-grade colleagues (70 years’ experience between us). They are my teammates and supportive bookends as my classroom finds itself between their rooms. I remember when we had the locks upgraded in our 100-year-old building. Any connecting classrooms were now locked; upstairs, the intermediate rooms were all connected on their respective sides.

I can see my small gavel that I use for our auctions: the kids earn points for positive behaviors and can “cash out” by buying free time, a visit to their first-grade teacher, or perhaps some private time with one of our stuffed animals. They all wanted Piglet or Eeyore to sit on their desks overseeing their daily work. I marveled at their imagination throughout the year; these creative reward ideas were no exception.

Earlier that year, after Sandy Hook, we, of course, talked about safety. One of the kids suggested using our auction gavel to defend against any “bad people” who might get into our room. Children want to help.

Of course, they do.

I went home that evening and cried again for the Newtown children, families, and teachers. I think of the “what would you do if” scenario. If you are a teacher, you do.

Of course, you do.

BACK STORY

A behind-the-scenes look at how our stories get made, featuring our writers, photographers, illustrators, editors, and designers.

I have estimated that a 10-foot ladder could reach my classroom windows if we had to evacuate — ludicrous to even think of it, yet I have. I think of our fantastic principal and wonderful secretary who are closest to the front door; our terrific school nurse and my lovely friend who teaches first grade are with-in eyeshot as well. I think of my friend who teaches kindergarten downstairs as she is the closest classroom to the back entrance. We are a close-knit community.

We are friends.

Of course, we are.

We wait.

No matter how often we had discussed this noise as a class, it nevertheless jars all of us. It is not loud, yet the sound reverberates through the silence and through us. Amy tightens her grip. I signal thumbs up to my kids as we collectively exhale. We now wait for the fire alarm to sound as we ready to complete the remainder of the drills.

When parents asked about safety, my answer was always: “We are as safe as we can be.” Our district and school have done a laudable job addressing safety issues. Yet, in a real-life scenario... How would it look? Where would the “bad people” get in? What would I do as their last line of defense? We think of these things.

Of course, we do.

We weep for the children murdered. We weep for the families shattered. We weep for the survivors traumatized. We weep for all of our children, confused and frightened. And we weep for this country, fractured and reduced.

Let us hug our children. Comfort them. Talk with them. Listen to their concerns. Then let us reach out to our legislators.

Please.

For their safety. For their sanity.

For, they are sacred. □



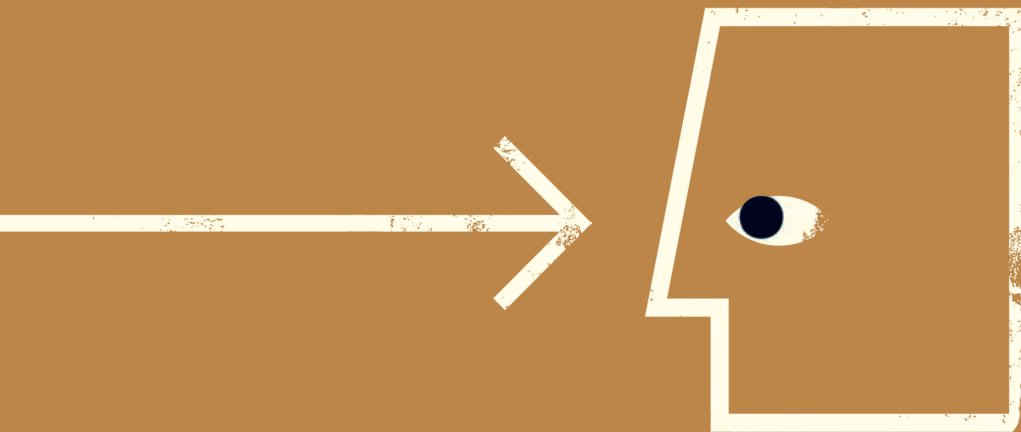
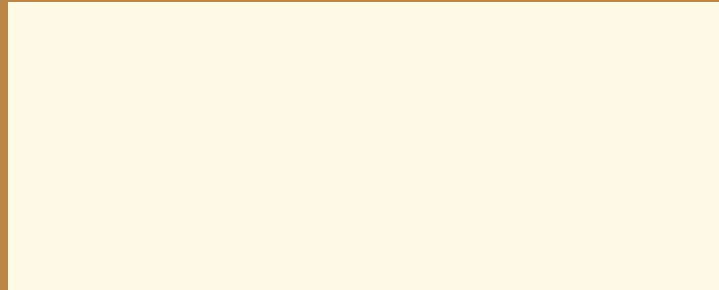
It's always interesting to attend photo shoots for the magazine. When they're on campus, we get a lot of attention from the community, especially students, and especially when the photographer has a lot of big equipment — lights, softboxes, reflectors. It's fun and, I'm sure, a bit of a high for the person being photographed. When it's off campus, it's often more low-key. That was the vibe when we set up shop at a restaurant near MIT to photograph master's student and chef Jenny Dorsey (above right) for our Study Skills spread. We wanted to shoot her in a kitchen, but the kitchen in her apartment was small. What about a professional kitchen, we wondered? Hard to set that up, given that most restaurant staffs are prepping all day. Luckily, Jenny had a friend, Tracy Chang, who owns Pagu, a restaurant that would be empty for a few hours one morning, and she was generous enough to let us shoot there. It was raining hard that day, but with photographer Matt Kalinowski (above left), we were able to get some beautiful, warm shots while having great conversations about food justice, hot chile oil, and the downside of Yelp.

EDITOR LORY HOUGH, AFTER ATTENDING THE PHOTO SHOOT AT PAGU. (SEE THE STORY ON PAGE 20.)



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“Solutions are out there, especially if you look close to the source: people who have been impacted in some way by the problem.”

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