

Using Fiction to Research Silenced or Counter Narratives of Lives In-Between Contested Race, Gender, Class and Power in the South

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DRAWING UPON the works of Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize-winning African American woman, novelist, and master storyteller, Toni Morrison (1970, 1973, 1976, 1987, 1988, 1992, 1993, 1999, 2000, 2003, & 2008); activist and Black feminist protest thinker and writer, bell hooks (1981, 1984, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2009, & 2010); Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, activist, and womanist, Alice Walker (1983, 1989, 1997, & 2006); Black feminist thinker and writer, Patricia Hills Collins (1998, 2000), and the critical race theorist and the first tenured African-American professor of Law at Harvard University, Derrick Bell (1987, 1992, & 1995), I have been engaged in an inquiry (Mikell, 2011) into Southern cultures, Black traditions, and Black women with a focus on the life journey of one Black woman educator through racial, sexual, class, and cultural oppression to womanhood.

I was raised in a segregated rural community that valued education, schooled in a system which subverted or downplayed the Black accomplishments to the U. S. history, have been working in an urban school which was forced to split into two schools and to change its name due to its failure to meet the Adequate Yearly Progress set up by the state and federal mandates with the intent to forgo reorganization under the direction of the state. I live in-between two worlds: one as a Black teacher who understands the struggles of my ancestors and has witnessed or experienced suppressions, repressions, and oppressions; and one who teaches younger generations of Black children who know little about Black struggles, history, and heritages.

Ingrained in dogma of secrecy, writing about my life and publically talking about my issues is a constant struggle. Putting my experience in print for posterity is sacrosanct in my family, race, and culture. The South, for me, is a complex simple place to live. The allure of a relaxed hospitable environment pulls one in to how beautiful and soothing most communities can be. This façade hides the seedier other – “Dirty South.” Whoever coined that phrase – poet, rapper, novelist, or who – depicts a more accurate description of what lies beneath this “whitewashed” society.

I choose to use fiction rather than narrative inquiry in my research since I feel that fiction

protects people in my life and in history. Although I fictionalize most of the characters in my stories, I still feel vulnerable for myself and others. Most of my life has been shrouded in denial and secrecy – an ingrained Southern trait that I still find difficult to change or shake off. My children do not know much about me. I have tried to shield them as much as possible from the unjust world while giving them necessary tools to survive. I, however, feel that I have given my beloved children little of my inner self. Using fiction allows me to feel having more freedom and protection to tell some of the horrible experiences I have witnessed. I hope that one day I will be brave enough to share with my children more of my inner self.

Although I have been working diligently to ensure that the fictionalized stories parallel real life events, using fiction in my research is still not seen as valid, authentic, and scholarly except for my own professors. In spite of the controversy over using fiction in educational research, I advocate for fiction since it does not make my experiences less valid, rather, more palatable.

Autobiographical Roots of My Research

My research did not begin with my interest in telling my life stories. It never occurred to me that my experiences played a role in education or benefited others. That came later as I began to question my beliefs and my interactions with my students. I was raised in a time and place that Blacks, especially Black women, did not complain about their situation(s). We were too busy with making a living to take time to sit around and commiserate about our misery. Plus everybody seemed to live the same life. We lived in small town communities, everyone knew everyone else's business, and we gossiped about who was doing what; but, very few people complained about their life and hardships or discussed family issues in public even though the public already knew the business. They spent time trying to find solutions to, rather than dwelling on, their problems. This mindset permeated my life. The issue I felt most passionate about as I began the doctoral program was drugs as a way to control students, particularly Black boys in class. My research interest shifted after I completed an autobiographical writing assignment for my qualitative dissertation writing class. The assignment was for the class to write about our lives, to share with the class who we were and how we became who we are as teachers, mothers, sisters, etc. The writing assignment was emotional, painful, and cathartic. By the time I presented my assignment to the class, I had relived several dark and painful childhood memories. A few people, including my sister and my professor, enjoyed the paper. However, I felt that it was a very emotional journey that had been long ago forgotten. This class delved into the writings of many different authors on issues of race, gender, class, and place, particularly about the South.

We discussed the need for more research done on the marginalized, suppressed, or disenfranchised individuals and groups. Never had this been made clearer to me until I attended the American Education Research Association (AERA) Conference for the first time in 2010. After sitting in a few sessions about issues faced by the marginalized people of color, particularly women of color, I felt that there was something missing from their presentations and did not have to look far to identify what it was--the feelings, heart, and soul--the essence of being Black and other was missing. The data presented made a lot of logical sense. However, I found it hard to see how someone white and/or male could tell me how to be Black and female. Needless to say, I eventually abandoned my desire to do a case study of the young Black boy who was about to be medicated because he could not sit still in the normal classroom. Instead I chose to tell my

stories and the stories of my sisters of colors and ethnicities. I read the works of several very inspiring women authors; but, there was not a treasure trove of literature to choose from when it came to works written by women of color from the South and the issues they face. I used to know that I had a lot to say; but, I was also conditioned early in life to the notion that nobody wanted to hear what I had to say. As a child growing up in the South, I felt that the adults in my life just wanted me to be quiet and get off to some other places. As long as I did not complain or get in their way, I had a pretty peaceful time. From an early age, this made me watch how people interacted. This helped me to survive an oppression steeped in abuse as I grew up noticing people saying one thing and doing the other.

I began my doctoral work thinking I would do narrative inquiry and try to be as honest and thorough as possible. I soon found that I was censoring what I was willing to reveal for public scrutiny. This hesitation was in stark contrast to what I was attempting to do – to break through the barriers and give voice to others as a way to move from the margins to the center. Instead of giving voice, I was silencing my voice by censoring the content. My younger sister pushed me to “write it all.” She was more than willing to sit and talk about her version of different memories I had already written about. We realized that we had different perspectives with almost identical memories of the same events. She and I even let a cousin to read a few pages of the stories. Our cousin did not live our reality; she was shocked at the content but liked the writing. With all the support and urging, I still could not push myself to freely write the “whole” truth for the world to see and read. My Southern upbringing was so ingrained that I did not think I should talk about dark issues with anybody let alone to put it in print for the public since I thought that my story was not worth writing about because no one wanted to hear my stories. After discussing this challenge with my professor, she suggested me to writing my stories as fiction to protect myself and the characters in my life. After careful consideration of her suggestion, I decided to use fiction to write about my life and the lives of my sisters. This shift in methodology sparked my burning desire to write about lives and opened my mind to the possibilities of visiting those dark corners of my memories that I had long tried to shut off and forget. The burning desire to get them out became even greater as I changed jobs and saw firsthand that some of my students were going through some of the same issues I had survived as a child. But writing about our lives was incredibly painful as I dived into some of the worst experiences of the characters in my inquiry lived through.

Transcending Theoretical and Methodological Boundaries

When I chose to use fiction as my methodology, I transcended traditionally accepted methodological boundaries. My first hurdle in pursuing this methodology was to define fiction and to determine how to use it within the accepted boundaries of academic research. I then attempted to justify my use of fiction as an accepted methodology. I did not comprehend the importance of using fiction until one of my committee members, at one of my dissertation committee meetings, told me quite forcefully that I needed to justify, defend, and demonstrate why fiction was essential to my research. To say I was floored by a new understanding of what I was doing would be an understatement. When I left the meeting, the first thing I did was to re-read the methodology section. I realized it was a pretty strong justification but it did need further clarifications. Although some researchers had engaged in narrative inquiry, memoir, autobiography, poetry, song, art, etc. to tell their stories of the South, few used fiction as a

methodology for a scholarly inquiry such as dissertation research. Justifying the importance of using fiction in educational research to the academic world was critical but daunting.

While some scholars may think of fiction as works of the imagination or things that are made up or untrue, I focused on Dillard's (1982) definition of fiction as fabrication where parts of real life are rearranged or reordered to make my autobiographical work more interesting. Much like Rainer (1997), I feel that fiction can be used to entertain the reader by interpreting the world and to give the author freedom to tell the entire truth under its guise and protection. I looked at the work of many acclaimed Black women writers such as Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Patricia Hills-Collins, and Alice Walker to see how they created their stories or works while addressing issues in the Black communities. Much like Toni Morrison, I attempted to write stories with an honest directness that addressed the key issues head-on. Pushing beyond the traditional methodological boundaries allowed me to be free and courageous to write honestly about my life and the lives of my sisters. Fiction allowed me to tell stories through different perspectives without holding back while protecting the characters in our lives.

I began to outline how the stories would be told and how they would be grouped by ages, time periods, and experiences. After writing out the real stories with all the characters, time, settings, events, circumstances, conflicts, themes, and plot, I began to add the "meat to the bone" or add more heart and soul to stories to illustrate the South from a Black female perspective. I created a composite character (He, 2003), Marie Sincerely Lucky, who embodied real characters in my life, sometimes as a bystander, sometimes as a participant, and sometimes as a narrator. Her life was a constant struggle of in-between home and school, a world of double-standards between male and female gender roles, a societal divide of white versus black, and a culture of biblical teachings versus a life of religious upheaval and rebellion. Whereas He and her fellow researchers fictionalized their backgrounds and created composite characters to protect their identities in *A River Forever Flowing: Cross-cultural Lives and Identities in the Multicultural Landscape* (2003), I drew from the characteristics of the women I have known through the years, such as myself, my sisters, my friends, and other women I have met in my lifetime. I changed their backgrounds and used fictional names to disguise their identities. This composite character allowed me the freedom to tell stories through different perspectives or viewpoints. Once the stories were written, I analyzed them within my selected theoretical frameworks and reflected on how they affected the composite character and her interactions with her students, communities, and societies. I address some of the conflicts my characters face and their in-betweenness in the interludes through varying theoretical frameworks since one theoretical framework was not enough to address the issues faced by my characters. After writing up the stories, I then theorized them which was the most challenging aspect of using fiction in educational research.

I used Womanism, Black Feminist Thought, and Critical Race Theory to frame the work. The theoretical framework depended on what issue or topic was discussed or addressed. The oppressive hierarchies in the novellas are often identifiable as one framework or the other while at other times the action or plotline was the determining factor for framing the narrative. I chose to tell the stories that supported the issues I addressed in my research – Black cultures, Southern traditions, Black women, education (school vs. home and student vs. teacher), and abuse (rape, incest, and molestation). Many of the stories dealing with the daily task of living and shared oppression of Black females from society and the Black community were theorized through Black Feminist Thought. Critical Race Theory was used to deal with societal issues of race that impacted on the marginalized and oppressed women of the South. I used Womanism to frame the narratives that dealt with issues affecting people of all races and classes. When it was difficult to

theorize a story using one theoretical framework, I chose the tenets from an appropriate framework that best fit the story.

I create a composite (He, 2003) character, Marie Sincerely Lucky, an ordinary farm girl from a rural Southern community. I utilize Marie as a persona to tell key life events and experiences using fiction and the seasonal metaphor, literal and Biblical, which becomes the titles of sections throughout my writing. I narrate Marie Sincerely Lucky's life in specific seasons: early childhood (with stepdad and after stepdad), the teen years, and adulthood (relationships, teaching career, military, and doctoral candidate). I tell Marie Sincerely Lucky's life in novellas. Each novella begins with a prelude that introduces characters, time, place, and setting and ends with an interlude that summarizes and theorizes the novella. The *Epilogue* at the end serves as a follow-up or update of the life of the main character.

Researching Silenced or Counter Narratives of Lives In-Between Contested Race, Gender, Class and Power in the South

Researching anything about the South can be daunting for Black women and women in general. Works by Black authors about the South, unless they are mainly fiction, are difficult to find. The slave narratives are not difficult to locate; but, they did leave a lot to be desired in their reading. They often seem scripted to me. Unlike the stories told to me as a child sitting with my maternal great-grandmother, the narratives left too much out. Her tales were full of colorful language and descriptions of events that one could visualize being there while the narratives seemed to be dull and boring accounts of day to day life as if answering questions instead of telling the story. The South is a place that sometimes seems to be stuck in a time warp on most issues, especially issues of race, class, and gender.

One of the problems I had to be conscious of while writing my stories was how what I wrote would impact the Black communities. I wanted to write the truth without further denigrating my race. My truth is not pretty, neat, or clean...it often delved into the seedier side of life in the *Dirty South*. Although these dark issues have, I believe, been prevalent in the Black communities, they are seldom discussed since these true negatives will be added to the false stereotypical negatives already imposed upon us. Anyone criticizing the race from within runs the risk of being ostracized and ridiculed. If I wrote our truth knowing I might suffer these consequences. But, I felt it was worth the risk. We fight for our right to be equal and we try to write our counter narratives to inform an uninformed and often a racist society about who we are as a race of people. We discuss and chronicle many of the atrocities suffered at the hands of this society; but, we are reluctant to discuss what I believe are generational curses inherited from those atrocities. Much of what was done generations ago has permeated who many of us are today. The abused have adopted the stereotypes heaped upon them and wear them like a badge of honor at times. It is no more evident than the way our youth call themselves the *N-word*.

I believe that much of this is because our history has continued to be missing or misrepresented in education. Black children seldom see themselves in the history books and they are bored stiff in history classes across America. As a testing coordinator, I was privileged to breakdowns of students testing domains in history. When teachers, parents, students, etc. look at the failure rate on these standardized tests (that should be based on standards designed to ensure students are receiving the proper concepts in classes across America and that should also address the achievement gap disparity between the races), one thing is clear--many students failed the

domains dealing with the slavery years. There are very few Black history teachers in our district; but I don't think that matters much when they are tied, as are all other history teachers, to the slanted and one-sided versions of the truth in the state adopted textbooks or they are also ignorant of their history. Black history has never really gained a prominent place in the history books and the newer textbooks tend to gloss over slavery--the dark stain on the US past--even focus more on other aspects of the period. This does not mean that these teachers, Black and white, cannot supplement the text with activities that provide students with a more complete history of the US. Rather they are inhibited by time constraints imposed by the long list of standards they have to prepare students for the standardized tests. As a result, students are lack of interest in history or believe the lies the history books tell them (Loewen, 2007). For those who tout test scores and push for raising them across the district and state, a critical look and assessment of the domains are a glaring confirmation of what is left out of education.

Further, the children of color do not often see themselves positively in history except during Black history month in February. About sixteen years ago when I first began teaching in this district, all departments glorified February and assigned many projects for African American children. Over the years, the glow has worn off and all that is left is the ceremonial research project on a famous African American. Students are given the same rhetoric year after year about only a few well-known, reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks to name a few. As the years pass, students have slowly begin to disconnect with the Civil Rights Movement and their history. Few know what the true struggle for Civil Rights entail because this is not readily talked about in homes anymore. Only a couple of generations have passed; but, the Black pride and little history we did have is being slowly eradicated.

Many times our students, especially children of color, are abused on many levels. They are constantly told they are not smart and they are lazy. This is not always verbal. It can also be felt or experienced in how they are treated. What do they do? How do they respond? They either ignore what others say and succeed or they become disruptive, dumb, and lazy. Many of them see no positive future for themselves. When a student in a school with majority Black students, where I taught as a veteran teacher of 16 years, stands up in class and tells me that he has not had a Black teacher in his three years of high school, I immediately see that as a problem. Parents, schools, and societies have failed them. They have failed themselves. Everyone is pointing the finger at someone else--parents at schools and teachers, teachers at parents and students, and society at all three. During the "blame game," little to nothing happens to affect positive change. While espousing ideas of equality for all or education as key to a better future, many people and institutions still practice the oppression from generations ago. Their actions speak volumes when faced with the opportunity to illustrate their openness to equality and they fail the test by relying on stereotypical beliefs and practices. This is not true for all people of the dominant race. Nevertheless, it happens too often.

Raising Challenging Questions

My inquiry was intended to challenge stereotypes about Southern Blacks and to explore beliefs, cultures, histories, and experiences that many Black women teachers encounter on a daily basis with the intent to assist them in understanding some deep-seated issues in relation to Southern traditions, Black cultures, Black women, and Black children. The two biggest underlying questions I attempted to answer in my work were: What kind of baggage do we (as

teachers) bring to the classroom? How does this baggage affect our teaching and students? Teachers are constantly looking at and talking about the baggage students bring to school. However, they seldom look at themselves as if they forget they have preconceived notions that affect their thinking and doing. A few teachers think that they are God in the classroom; but, in reality, they are mere mortals with flaws and warts. The first things many students see and recognize in their teachers are their weakness and warts even though their teachers try to cover up or hide them. In my inquiry, I try to take a critical look at my life and the lives of others who may have similar experiences and then I analyze how those experiences play out in the classroom. I first attempt to illustrate the educational experiences from a student's point of view while dealing with effective and ineffective teachers. Sometimes I relate and analyze the stories from a teacher's point of view. I keep asking the following questions: How can teachers educate critical thinkers when they are not allowed or do not know how to become critical thinkers? Why are teachers constantly left out of the conversations when education reform is an issue?

Our students often become victims to those who are mandated to prepare them for life. The questions then become: What kind of life? At what expense to the children? There are teachers in the school buildings who do not desire or want to be educators. Many of these people only want a job and a paycheck. Students can spot this kind of teacher immediately. I would not classify them as racist or oppressive but something much worse--uncaring about students or consequence of their miseducation. One would think school districts have already made the correlation between making positive Adequate Yearly Progress and increasing students' academic achievement with "highly qualified" teachers who desire to or know how to teach. When teachers are held more accountable for student success, they have less control of providing opportunities for success as lessons are scripted, guides, texts, and resources are constrained, and tests are standardized. Since most students who come to us are not up to the standard, if there is such a category, how can we expect everything we deliver to them to be up to the standard? Shouldn't we be tailoring instead of standardizing? Again, the mindset of standardization can smack you square in the face when you are least expecting it. The following is a novella about Marie's life in her new school.

As she was sitting in the training session (professional learning class or PLC), Marie listened to the conversation going on around her about a point the presenter made – if students are not where they needed to be academically, we needed to (while covering the content or standards) teach the foundation skills necessary for them to be successful in our various classrooms. This was a concept that she was very familiar with and had been practicing in the small learning community she had just transferred from...it was a part of what teaching was about for her; but, for some of her new colleagues, it was a slap in the face and they made no bones about it.

"When students come to my math class without the mathematical foundation from middle and elementary school, I don't have the time to go back and teach that...I have so many standards to teach that I barely have enough time to cover those let alone going back to re-teach something they should already have," said one teacher.

Soon others joined in and agreed with this sentiment. Marie listened in silence and thought, "These people are really crazy. How in the hell can you teach them your standards if they don't know what they are supposed to know before beginning your class?" The presenter (vice principal) let the din continue for a few minutes before bringing the focus back to the presentation...never once did anyone in the room

(including the presenter or Marie) bring this point to the forefront. They were all unwitting co-conspirators to this twisted mindset. Marie knew why she did not speak up (wasn't going to change their mindset and would make her an instant target of the argument); but, she later wondered why the vice principal did not say anything.

A few weeks later the principal challenged all teachers to report to an area in the media center to post their thoughts on what needed to be done to help the students (better prepare them for academic achievement). She felt that all teachers should start looking for proactive ways to address student learning. Each person was to come in during their planning period, read what was written (questions and responses), and respond /post their thoughts. By the time Marie got to the second area, she was disappointed, disillusioned, and pissed. The responses to the questions were so rude, disrespectful, and negative that she wondered why any of these people would be in a classroom...they clearly did not care about children and their success. Many thought that student success (or failure) was not their problem and had no problem posting this up for all to see. Granted this was anonymous...but it was overwhelming how many posts were along the same vein – Marie saw one almost but not quite positive post in the bunch.

When the new teacher, Mrs. Marsh (who Marie was helping to transition into the school), came to chat a few days after these two events, she expressed her dismay at all the negative notes posted on the board when teachers were instructed to look at the four sections and post questions or solutions on the board. She went on to say that her boss from the school she had just left would have had everyone's head had they pulled such a stunt because she strongly believed that teachers had a responsibility to each student and held them accountable for what their students did in class. These teachers (who posted), clearly felt and did not mind sharing with the entire staff that they were not responsible for failing grades...it was the student's and parents' fault. While they (students and parents) share part of the blame in many instances, these teachers clearly put all the blame on anyone but themselves. Marie was accustomed to this type of response; but, the new teacher was flabbergasted at the postings and the lack of seriousness for their craft and its importance for students. The directives from the principal were clear...read through the topics and seriously respond with ways or suggestions to improve student success given that many of them lacked the foundations from middle school and some of the upperclassmen were repeating courses two or three times and were currently still failing. Mrs. Marsh felt this alone should have been a mirror into what the teachers were failing to do...not it was the students fault for not getting the information. Such disregard and respect for the principal was also evident to her in their behavior. (Mikell, 2011)

This anonymous exercise was a clear picture of what the principal was dealing with (lack of respect, lack of follow-ship to her leadership, and lack of ability to properly re-educate her staff and deal with the situation). The power in this situation was inverted and had shifted...the teachers appeared to be in total control. These educators had all heard the rhetoric on the importance of caring and not laying blame (on themselves, students, or parents) and the need to focus on ways to improve student learning; but, apparently this did not transcend to this way of thinking. Following the directive from the principal did not seem important to them. It seemed that these teachers had decided on what they were willing to do and nothing was about to change their practices...no amount of authority (in this case) made them feel obligated to critically assess themselves and think of ways to ensure the success of their students. I believe critical self-

analysis is the first step in becoming better at anything we do and is even more critical when teaching today's youth. We must be able to identify things within ourselves that either help or hinder educational experiences in our classrooms.

Educating critical thinkers is of paramount importance to education. However, the scripting and standardization of schooling leaves little room for teachers to be critical thinkers. Standards are set up for resources, pacing guides, lesson plans, handouts, projects, etc. for most of subjects taught in today's classrooms. With the synchronization and standardization of lessons, one only need to think how to tailor the lesson to their particular classes but not to individual students...no thinking... just doing. I truly believe the people who have created this way of doing things feel that they ensure students to get the best possible education by ensuring teachers to have everything needed to teach the material. An alternate theory is that the majority of teachers are female; and, corporate America, comprised mostly of men, does not feel teachers are up to the job unless the men help them along. So they take away teachers' autonomy to design their lessons to fill the empty vessels of students. If teachers are not encouraged to be critical and do critical activities with their students, how can they educate critical thinkers? I often feel we are teaching students to memorize and cheat their ways through school and life as long as they can pass tests and as long as they know all they need to know. Some of my students will ask if an assignment is going to be graded. If not, they are less apt to complete it as there is no reward or benefit to them. The mere assignment to reinforce a concept is not worth their efforts and they will not waste their time, effort, or brain-power on doing it. They fail to see the benefit of studying for learning's sake because it is *so boring* to them. I have yet to find a solution to reach most of these students or to change many of the negative mindsets; but, I keep trying to do what I can to reach some to turn them around.

Invigorating Possibilities of Positive Curriculum and Societal Change

I ended my research with the hope of working with a group of girls "at-risk" on the school dance teams. These girls were considered by administrators and teachers to be the worst in the school. They were unable to participate in any other extra-curricular activities because of failing grades or disruptive behavior. This team was the only thing they qualified for and it had been organized as an outlet for these girls and used as a tool to control their behavior. The threat of removing them from the team often caused them to behave in class and keep their grades up to the requisite 70. Teaching this new group of students, I imagined, created possibilities for positive change. However, the dream did not come to true as what I had envisioned. But it was worth a try. My co-advisor and I had a plan since we had served in the military, traveled around the world, and had similar experiences with these girls. We worked with them academically and socially to expose them to various perspectives on their abilities and opportunities. We held tutoring sessions, meetings with them and their parents, group discussions, and talks about dreams and opportunities. All of this had never been done for them before and no one thought it would work. This group had not been allowed to participate in any activities outside of the school building because of their misbehavior. No one thought that they knew how to behave in public. I thought that was a ridiculous notion since many of them worked and participated in public away from school. Nothing we tried to do, however, was successful. Although many in this particular group did not want to accept assistance to help them academically or socially. Our goal is to continue to do what we can to create opportunities and to share our knowledge,

expertise, and life experiences knowing that we might not be able to obtain any funding to support our efforts and we are not likely to be appreciated.

The push for positive change is taking a back seat to educational funding. Many school systems are cutting needed and/or successful programs in attempts to balance their budgets. With the backdrop of the financial crisis, some want to see public education privatized; some want parents to have the option through vouchers to opt out of public education in favor of private schools. This paints a bleak future for public education. I, however, believe there is still hope. The hope begins with teachers even though no one ever listen to us or support our efforts. The “strength of shared experience...[and] the political demands of millions speaks more powerfully than do the pleas of a few isolated voices” (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 357). The teaching profession has not been able to effectively come together to have their voices heard in the United States, particularly in the South. Those educators who were once a force to be reckoned with in the North have seen their unions rendered virtually useless over the last few months. The sneaky legislation took union power. Finding our voices and politicizing our issues instead of waiting for another outsider to tell us what to do. Teachers are the experts and we must show that we know what we are doing instead of being told what to do.

We must become masters of our craft by honing out skills and continuing to have a broad based knowledge to reach students. As a high school teacher, I have been asked by students to solve math problems, answer economic and science questions, or correctly write programming code, etc. Can I answer all the questions? The answer in most of those cases was *yes*. I actually knew more than I thought I knew. In the business classes where I teach, I often make connections to the core curriculum as well as to complex real life. In doing this, I have enhanced my skills and knowledge along the way. It has been rewarding for students to ask questions and for me to be able to assist them or provide them with resources to help themselves. Isn't this what teaching is all about?

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