



article

reconstructing a just community of inquiry

philosophizing with children across the intersections of race and disability

authors

anna mei piro

university of wisconsin-madison,
department of rehabilitation psychology
and special education, madison,
wisconsin, USA

e-mail: abaker8@wisc.edu

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5224-3227>

zhe gigi an

university of wisconsin-madison,
department of rehabilitation psychology
and special education, madison,
wisconsin, USA

e-mail: zhe.gigi.an@wisc.edu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8093-6500>

editor

walter omar kohan

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2263-9732>

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abstract

As disability scholars and special educators working and studying in the United States, the question of how to engage in anti-racist praxis is a present and pressing one. In this conceptual paper, we begin with the creation and naturalization of race in the 1700s. Using the theories of childism, Disability Critical Race Theory, and abolitionist teaching, we then trace how the initial conceptualization of race and its deep entanglement with (dis)ability and adultism contributes to epistemic neglect and injustice. Educators, including those facilitating Philosophy for/with Children, inadvertently perpetuate these harms when they have not developed an intersectional and critical consciousness. We present the Co-Conspirator Relationship Framework (CCRF) as guidance for creating epistemically just Communities of Inquiry. The CCRF is a framework that invites educators to Solidarity, Vulnerability, and Action on behalf of their students, pushed toward the ultimate goal of collective liberation through continual critical self-reflection. We suggest that by being in solidarity, vulnerability, and action with their students, educators can create CoIs of accessible and meaningful philosophizing for all children. In addition, we celebrate and affirm the power of educators in hostile times, and offer the CCRF as a form of empowered praxis. Through critical self-reflection and toward collective

liberation, we move forward in purposeful love.

keywords: critical race theory; disability studies; childism; epistemology; intersectionality.

reconstruyendo una comunidad de indagación justa

filosofando con niños a través de las intersecciones de raza y discapacidad

resumen

Como estudiosos de la discapacidad y educadores especiales que trabajamos y estudiamos en los Estados Unidos, la cuestión de cómo participar en una praxis antirracista es una preocupación presente y urgente. En este artículo conceptual, comenzamos con la creación y naturalización de la raza en el siglo XVIII. Utilizando las teorías del childismo, la Teoría Crítica de la Discapacidad y la enseñanza abolicionista, rastreamos cómo la conceptualización inicial de la raza y su profunda conexión con la (dis)capacidad y el adultismo contribuye al descuido epistemológico y la injusticia. Los educadores, incluidos aquellos que facilitan Filosofía para/con Niños, perpetúan inadvertidamente estos daños cuando no han desarrollado una conciencia crítica e interseccional. Presentamos el Marco de Relación de Co-Conspiradores (CRRF, por sus siglas en inglés) como guía para la creación de Comunidades de Investigación epistemológicamente justas. El CRRF es un marco que invita a los educadores a la Solidaridad, Vulnerabilidad y Acción en nombre de sus estudiantes, inclinándose hacia el objetivo final de la liberación colectiva mediante la auto-reflexión crítica continua. Sugerimos que, al estar en solidaridad, vulnerabilidad y acción con sus estudiantes, los educadores pueden crear Comunidades de Investigación accesibles y significativas para todos los niños. Además, celebramos y afirmamos el poder de los educadores en tiempos hostiles, y ofrecemos el CRRF como una forma de praxis empoderada. A través de la auto-reflexión crítica y hacia la liberación colectiva, avanzamos con amor intencional.

palabras clave: teoría crítica de la raza; estudios sobre la discapacidad; childismo; epistemología; interseccionalidad.

reconstruindo uma comunidade justa de investigação

filosofando com crianças nas interseções de raça e deficiência

resumo

Como estudiosos da deficiência e educadores especiais que atuam e estudam nos Estados Unidos, a questão de como engajar-se em uma praxis antirracista é uma preocupação atual e urgente. Neste artigo conceitual, começamos com a criação e naturalização da raça no século XVIII. Utilizando as teorias do childismo, a Teoria Crítica da Deficiência e o ensino abolicionista, rastreamos como a conceptualização inicial da raça e sua profunda interconexão com a (dis)capacidade e o adultismo contribuem para o descuido epistemológico e a injustiça. Educadores, incluindo aqueles que facilitam Filosofia para/com Crianças, perpetuam inadvertidamente esses danos quando não desenvolveram uma consciência crítica e interseccional. Apresentamos o Marco de Relação de Co-Conspiradores (CRRF, na sigla em inglês) como orientação para a criação de Comunidades de Investigação epistemicamente justas. O CRRF é um framework que convida educadores à Solidariedade, Vulnerabilidade e Ação em nome de seus estudantes, direcionando-os ao objetivo final da libertação coletiva por meio da reflexão crítica contínua. Sugerimos que, ao estar em solidariedade, vulnerabilidade e ação com seus estudantes, educadores podem criar Comunidades de Investigação acessíveis e significativas para todas as crianças. Além disso, celebramos e afirmamos o poder dos educadores em tempos hostis, oferecendo o CRRF como uma forma de praxis empoderada. Através da reflexão crítica e em direção à libertação coletiva, avançamos com amor intencional.

palavras-chave: teoria crítica da raça; estudos da deficiência; childismo; epistemologia; interseccionalidade.

reconstructing a just community of inquiry

philosophizing with children across the intersections of race and disability

introduction

Philosophy for/with Children (P4/wC) has developed as both a global and parochial practice. Yet, over the last 50 years, the field has often overlooked the topics of race and racism in P4/wC or adopted a color-evasive approach (Annamma et al., 2017). As scholars and educators working in the special education contexts in the United States, we found ourselves both inspired and challenged by this call for contributions. The promise of P4/wC as an approach to build communities of inquiry, where our students engage in collective, philosophical, and critical reflections and conversations is compelling. Yet, we are also pressed to ask: How might P4/wC fit into the non-ideal, messy, and complex realities of everyday teaching and learning? And how do we center the often erased and ignored voices and participation of disabled children of color within this practice?

For readers unfamiliar with the structure of special education in the United States, a brief explanation is necessary. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students are eligible for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) if they are determined-through a comprehensive evaluation-to have one or more of 13 disabilities defined under IDEA and a documented need for special education and related services. According to the 2020-2021 Civil Rights Data Collection, approximately 14% of all students enrolled in U.S. public schools are students with disabilities (term used in IDEA)¹ under IDEA (Office for Civil Rights, 2024). These students have an assigned special education teacher, who determines, coordinates, and often implements interventions and accommodations.

This legal definition of “students with disabilities” outlines who we serve and the scope of our official responsibilities as special “educators” in the U.S. However, disability carries broader epistemological, conceptual, and political

¹ We primarily use identity-first language in this paper in alignment with both APA guidelines and recommendations from self-advocates (Akbar, 2022; Brown, 2012).

meanings that extend beyond and at times contradict legal definitions, which we address in the following sections. We intentionally use the word “educators” in this paper to position ourselves not only because it reflects our roles under the law but also because it speaks to how we personally understand and embody our work. This term captures both the systemic constraints we operate within and the agency and purpose we bring to be with our students. In this sense, “educator” becomes a word that holds the tensions between the structure and possibility/purpose.

This paper takes up these tensions by offering a critical and pragmatic approach to P4/wC – one that engages directly with the intersections of adultism, racism, and ableism. In the following section, we argue that if P4/wC is to be an equitable and transformative educational practice, it must acknowledge and confront the systemic marginalization of disabled children. Moreover, efforts to center race and racism in P4/wC must also take seriously the operations of ableism and the ways in which ableism and racism intersect. We then introduce the Co-Conspirator Relationship Framework (CCRF), our own proposal informed by philosophical inquiry, empirical evidence, and practical experiences with the U.S. special education system. Our goal is not to present a finalized model or a fixed set of practices. Instead, we offer this framework as an invitation to ongoing, reflexive inquiry.

the entanglement of adultism, ableism, and racism

To illustrate how adultism, ableism, and racism are not merely parallel systems of oppression but deeply entwined, we begin by turning to history. Our intention in tracing the historical roots of classification and hierarchical thinking (e.g., adult and child, able-bodied and disabled, White and Black) is not only to understand how these categories have been naturalized but also to emphasize the need for a critical consciousness to avoid further harm. As we think about doing philosophy today, we look back to natural philosophy.

Scholars began to shape natural philosophy into what we now recognize as natural science in the 18th century, amid European expansion and violent colonialism. These scholars operated within a hierarchical worldview based on

Christian theology: the divine at the top, man beneath, and below him creatures and inanimate objects (Charmantier, 2020). This way of thinking was further affirmed by the Greek philosophers they looked to as paragons of reason, especially Aristotle who defined the most evolved man as the contemplative man, or thinker. Not only was the thinker the highest form of human, he had the right and duty to control the lesser humans: women, children, and slaves (Young-Bruehl, 2012), who were lesser because they were unable to reason.

This concept of justified domination was naturalized in the 18th century. Carl von Linné, better known as Carl Linnaeus, published, edited, and republished his most influential work, *Systema naturae*. This work laid out a system for classifying all living organisms and introduced the Latin binomial naming system still in use today (Charmantier, 2020; Pratt, 2008). As part of this system of classification, Linnaeus organized humans into six categories. Four were according to skin color: Americans *H. Americani* (as in the indigenous people of the Americas), Europeans *H. Europaei*, Asiatics *H. Asiatici*, and Africans *H. afri*. The other two categories were *H. feri*, or those raised by animals, and the catchall category of “monsters”, *H. monstrosi*, for those with anatomical differences. (Linné, 1792). While Linnaeus himself did not use the term “race,” his physiological classifications of human groups remained consistent across published editions and were used by those who built on this work to define race. In addition, Linnaeus noted the inherent pathologies he associated with each group: Americans were stubborn and governed by customs, Asiatics were greedy and governed by opinion, and Africans were indolent and capricious. Meanwhile, Linnaeus describes Europeans as “of gentle manners, acute in judgement, of quick invention” (1792, p. 45). The descriptions of each group clearly demonstrate a bias toward Europeans. In other writings, Linnaeus followed the Aristotelian tradition, affirming that reason distinguishes humans from animals (Hoquet, 2014). Notably, in the *Systema naturae* only Europeans are portrayed as reasonable. In categorizing humanity, Linnaeus naturalized the separation of European, “civilized,” and “non-monstrous” humanity, simultaneously equating non-European races with the pathological and immoral.

When making these categorizations, Linnaeus and other taxonomists referenced 18th-century Mexican *casta* paintings, which depict the children and

their descendants of racial mixing between indigenous Mexicans, Europeans, and Africans (Müller-Wille, 2014). As the figures in the paintings become darker skinned, their attire and forms of work indicate lower social classes. There are scenes of those of African descent doing menial labor, doing no work at all, or even engaging in violence (Hobart, 2023). The terms for the hybrid children became increasingly offensive and explicitly linked to disability as generations continued, including “knock-kneed,” “brute,” or “wild people” (Hobart, 2023; Müller-Wille, 2014). As an example, we refer to two paintings from a larger *casta* series by Andrés de Islas. In the first painting, he depicts a *castizo* (three-quarters *español* (Spanish), one-quarter Indigenous) man and his *español* (Spanish) wife; their child is labelled an *español* and able to enjoy the benefits of being White: sitting in his mother’s lap, enjoying fine clothes, toys, and music. In contrast, the same series depicts the marriage between an *español* man and a *negra* (African woman); she beats him while their child, given the inhuman label *mulata* (mule)² cries (Hobart, 2023; Islas, 1774a, 1774b). The legitimization of this categorization and pathologization as “natural” science invisibilized the European imposition of their created hierarchy of humanity. The European natural scientist defined himself by negatives: he is not disabled, not racialized, and not childlike. He is the natural and apex form of man. This epistemological sleight of hand made invisible the dominant norms and domination enforced on western and westernized societies today, from biology to philosophy (Annamma, 2018; Biswas, 2022).

We linger on this history to emphasize **the necessity of intersectional and collective** resistance to oppression. Intersectionality emphasizes the interconnectedness of all marginalization. When race was conceptualized and naturalized, it was inextricably linked to ability, class, criminality, and more. This deep entanglement is reflected in numerous historical examples. To name a few, Emmanuel Kant equated colonized Tahitians with children (Biswas, 2022). Enslaved Black Americans were diagnosed with drapetomania and prescribed hard labor and corporal punishment as a cure (Willoughby, 2018). Today, when disabled children of color (often additionally made-marginalized along multiple

² A mule is the offspring of two different species, a donkey and a horse. By labeling the child a *mulata*, the child is rendered inhuman while simultaneously it is reaffirmed that White and African people are completely different species (Hobart, 2023).

axes) face frequent and intense life-altering, unjust consequences, it is impossible to attribute their circumstances to a single factor. Their multiple made-marginalized identities interact with and reinforce each other, informed by how historically they were used to define each other (Annamma, 2018; Connor, 2008; Crenshaw, 1989; Erevelles & Minear, 2010).

Crenshaw (1989) noted that “remaking the world where necessary” for those who are most made-disadvantaged results in advances for all made-marginalized groups. In other words, all marginalization is interconnected, and true equity cannot be achieved by advancing a single group at the expense of another. Through examining the origins of natural science and the oppressions it would naturalize and propagate, it is clear that systems of oppression in our current world originate from the same root of 18th century ideals. We view these systems as analogous to a grove of aspen trees; while on the surface each tree appears separate, they are in fact a single interconnected organism (Figure 1). True liberation from these systems, therefore, requires an intersectional and collective approach, rather than attempting to attack it tree by tree.

What does this mean when working toward an antiracist P4/wC praxis? It means working toward a praxis in which no bodymind is left behind (Berne & Sins Invalid, 2019). As we think about an antiracist P4/wC in the United States, we look to the critical theories of childism (Wall, 2024), Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) (Annamma et al., 2013), and abolitionist teaching (Love, 2019). Childism addresses systematic adultism, or prejudice against children, DisCrit examines the entanglement of ableism and racism, and abolitionist teaching focuses on a way forward amid systematic anti-Blackness in the United States. We center these theories because educators in the United States operate within systems that daily reproduce and uphold adultist, racist, and ableist structures and White supremacist priorities (Liebel & Meade, 2024; Love, 2019). These systems grant educators significant power over which students are referred for disability evaluations, when and how they receive their accommodations, and even if they can access a regular education classroom (Baker, 2002). Students of color are disproportionately diagnosed with the most stigmatizing labels and removed from regular education (Connor, 2008; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Skrtic, 1995). Without a critical consciousness of how fundamental racism, ableism, and adultism are to

U.S. education systems, an educator will inevitably perpetuate harm. An awareness of systematic oppression is the first step to resistance.

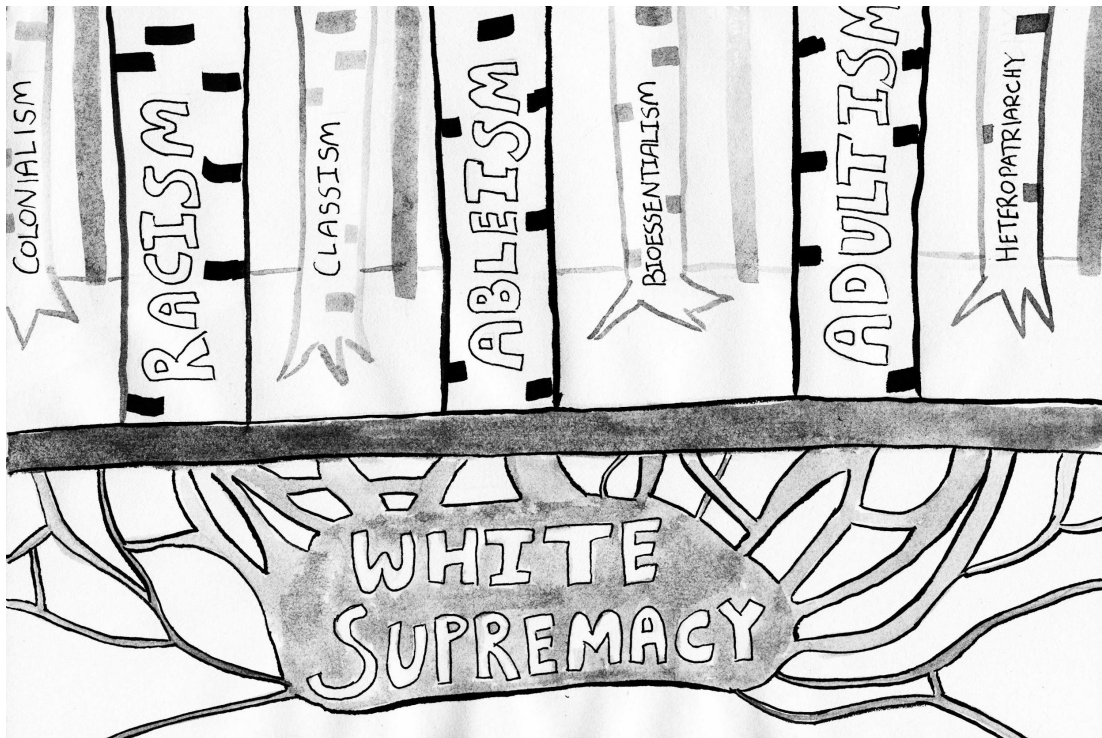


Figure 1: Systematic oppression as an aspen grove. **Source:** Anna Mei Piro.

childism

Childism as a concept and theory centers around how children are made-marginalized. The adult is taken as the norm and ideal in society, rendering the child's experience and knowledge invisible. Like feminism, childism seeks to uncover and resist the systemic inequities that arise from this imbalance - what we call adultism (Wall, 2022). In education settings, childism is naturally relevant as the adult/child power dynamic is ever present, and schools themselves often serve as adultist institutions that prioritize and reflect adultist priorities and systems (Biswas & Mattheis, 2022; Liebel & Meade, 2024). Simultaneously, childism goes beyond the teacher/child divide and offers a theoretical lens to reimagine children's roles in knowledge production and philosophical inquiry. The three theoretical constructs grounding childism as outlined by Wall (2024) are:

- a) An hermeneutics of reconstruction: Meaning-making is not only interpretation, but reconstruction of the world. Children both reconstruct the world and invite others to do the same. Childism calls in

adults to both receive the knowledge and meaning children develop and recreate the world itself in response.

- b) An ontology of deep interdependence: Childism rejects the valorization of independence. Both adults and children rely on others and each other to make it through the world. In the same vein, children also rely on adults for their liberation.
- c) A politics of empowered inclusion: Merely creating space is not enough. In order to reconstruct the world, difference needs to be actively empowered. In the childist context, this calls on adults to empower children and to platform and amplify their knowledge.

Childism does not claim to be unique as a critical theory, openly inspired by and borrowing practices from critical race theory, feminist theory, queer theory, and more. It aligns closely with the conceptual framework of P4/wC. Specifically, both childism and P4/wC center the child as a reasoning, social agent in contrast to the “blank slate” or “empty vessel” views (Jackson, 2001; Vansieleghem & Kennedy, 2011). Simultaneously, childism and P4/wC acknowledge and require attending to the fundamental power difference between adults and children (Jackson, 2001; Wall, 2022). However, the adult/child dynamic is far from the only power dynamic education settings. Especially in the U.S. context, systematic racism and ableism must be named. For this, we turn to the framework of DisCrit.

discrit

DisCrit offers a powerful lens for understanding how the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently. Against the medical model of disability, which frames disability as an objective and scientific measure entirely separate from race, DisCrit challenges the singular notions of the identity and insists that race and disability must be examined together as intersecting and constitutive social constructs. The medical model positions disability as an individual pathology located within the child, obscuring the social, cultural, political, and historical processes that pathologize differences and uphold notions of normalcy (Skrtic, 1995). Human diversity is natural, yet specific differences have been labeled as deviance or disability in need of correction or cure (Annamma et al., 2013; Baglieri et al., 2011). Historical work by scholars such as Willoughby (2018)

and Metzl (2010) further reveal how Western science has weaponized diagnostic categories to uphold racial hierarchies, producing pseudo-medical diagnoses such as drapetomania³ and weaponizing psychiatric labels like schizophrenia against Black communities, particularly during the civil rights area.

DisCrit exposes these historical and ongoing entanglements between racism and ableism and how they have operated together to suppress the knowledge and deny the rights of marginalized communities. Guided by DisCrit, we seek to restructure P4/wC into a practice where the voices and experiences of disabled children of color are valued as fundamental to philosophical inquiry, instead of excluded for their divergence from dominant norms. Alongside childism, DisCrit allows us to make visible how adultism, racism, and ableism are not isolated forces but deeply interconnected expressions of deeper systemic issues. With this understanding, we turn to Abolitionist Teaching to explore how we as scholars and educators can move beyond system-level critiques toward reconstructing practices that resist further harms and center purposeful love.

abolitionist teaching

Abolitionist teaching is the vital and audacious work of confronting systemic anti-Black racism in the U.S. and deconstructing these structures while simultaneously dreaming and building a liberatory future. It is about “surviving, resisting, thriving, healing, imagining, freedom, love, and joy” (Love, 2019, p. 2). The term *abolitionist* intentionally evokes the anti-slavery movement, as abolitionist teaching is deeply aware of the long history of anti-Blackness in America, from the Thirteenth Amendment’s slavery-as-punishment clause to the school-to-prison pipeline. Its Hydra-esque nature means that abolitionist teaching needs to be equally adaptive and varied. Dr. Bettina Love (2019, 2023) outlines the expansiveness of being an abolitionist teacher, from creating safe classroom spaces to organizing community mutual aid. Rather than a curriculum or checklist, being an abolitionist teacher is a worldview focused on recognizing and reshaping racist systems.

³ Drapetomania was a disease label given to enslaved persons who disobeyed and/or attempted to escape enslavement. Labeling these actions as pathological helped maintain the racist logic that slavery was the natural state for Africans (Bankole, 1998; Willoughby, 2018).

We borrow the term *co-conspirator* from Love (2019). A co-conspirator explicitly goes beyond allyship to actively combat racism, putting oneself at risk to do so. It requires critical consciousness and active, repeated self-reflection in order to both recognize one's own power but leverage it to support anti-racism. Love's example is that of James Tyson, a White man who put his body between police and Black woman Bree Newsome so she was able to remove a Confederate flag (2019). Tyson recognized that the police were less likely to use force against him, and leveraged that, at risk to himself. The ultimate goal of the co-conspirator is to create a liberated world where there are not individuals holding power over others⁴; in other words, to not only operationalize but give up their undue power in favor of an equitable world (Ekpe & Toutant, 2022). While Love does not extensively address (dis)ability in her work on abolitionist teaching, we see her framework as both the drive and the current - propelling a critical consciousness of the deeply intertwined systems of adultism, racism, and ableism and serving as a force to reshape these overlapping forms of oppression.

epistemic credit

The three frameworks discussed above, each illuminate systems of oppressions that intersect to marginalize disabled children of color. With our focus on P4/wC, we identify adultism, racism, and ableism as three mutually constitutive dynamics that work to other, silence, and pathologize those who do not conform to historically established White norms.

Chetty (2018) introduces the idea that P4/wC can operate as an 'epistemically gated' practice which excludes racially made-marginalized children because of its basis in "reasonableness" that is built on and perpetuates both White ignorance and a White supremacist status quo. The roots of this are in Aristotle's 'thinker' and natural sciences' legitimization of him. Froment (2025) similarly identifies epistemic neglect, in which a person's capacity to be knowledgeable is doubted and therefore opportunities for knowledge making and sharing are never given. Children are systematically disempowered and therefore reliant on

⁴ Anna Mei Piro; Zhe An: "We're In This Together: Creating a Co-Conspirator Relationship Framework", Presentation at the *Division for Early Childhood 2024 Conference*, 2024 (<https://sched.co/1e3IU>)

educators for opportunity (Froment, 2025; Wall, 2022). At the same time children, especially made-multiply-marginalized children, are not given epistemic credit, resulting in the presumption they have no meaningful knowledge and therefore opportunities are not necessary. In other words, epistemic neglect is self-sustaining.

P4/wC does not inherently solve epistemic neglect. Researchers and educators can gatekeep P4/wC through requiring children to ‘earn’ epistemic credit by adhering to dominant norms. Scholars within P4/wC have done impressive critical work examining how the norms of P4/wC can perpetuate oppressive systems, especially in relation to colonization and race (Chetty, 2018; Elicor, 2020; Reed-Sandoval, 2019; Rosas, 2023). As disability scholars and special educators, we wish to highlight the ways ableism can also be unintentionally perpetuated in P4/wC. For example, Lukey (2004) reflected on his own experience in doing P4/wC with autistic children in Hawai’i. Even as he did groundbreaking work to open the philosophical space to autistic children who were historically excluded, he does so by attempting to recreate P4/wC from a “regular” (p. 26) classroom. In other words, the autistic students had to earn epistemic credit by adhering to the standards and expectations of non-autistic students. Lukey himself began to imagine how P4/wC might look different in different communities, highlighting how unfair it is to restrict access to philosophy to those who “speak our language” (p. 28).

Gardelli and colleagues (2023) followed in Lukey’s footsteps in doing P4/wC with autistic children and firmly refuted the idea that it is impossible for autistic children to engage in P4/wC, but stated it as “(at least some) persons diagnosed with ASD can successfully participate” (p. 4). This phrasing and framing demonstrate that autistic people, by default, do not have epistemic credit. While accommodations such as thinking breaks and whiteboards for notetaking are provided, the autistic children are also required to adhere to social rules such as “show respect” and “make relevant contributions” (p. 14) rather than concrete and neurodivergent-affirming guidance such as “self-advocate if you feel misunderstood” or “explain how your comments are connected to the topic”; in other words they must earn epistemic credit by adhering to dominant social

norms—despite the fact that a key feature of autism is difficulty with neurotypical (non-autistic) behavior norms. When autistic students are required to devote thought and energy to mitigating their disability (rather than accommodating or adjusting expectations to accept autistic forms of socialization and communication), autistic children are denied full access to philosophical inquiry.

In the same vein, Kado (2025) did incredible work bringing Philosophy for Children-Hawaii to a community of disabled high school graduates in Japan, including a non-speaking focal student with complex support needs. We appreciate how Kado reversed the “impossibility paradigm,” calling on abled individuals to make participation in philosophy possible for disabled persons. At the same time, Kado continues to call the practice philosophy for *children*, perpetuating the simultaneously ableist and adultist implication that disabled adults are children. Kado also centers her analysis on the evolution of the philosophical dialogue around the non-speaking student without engaging the focal student directly. This risks furthering the ableist philosophical tradition of individuals with complex support needs as non-agents, or even non-humans, within philosophy (Redmore, 2023).

Froment (2025) went to great lengths to support students with Developmental Language Disorder, while affirming the modes of communication and needs of these neurodivergent students. At the same time, she falls back on the deficit-based Theory of Mind model to explain students’ perceived deficiencies in social communication, versus a model such as the double-empathy problem (Milton, 2012) which affirms both neurotypical and neurodivergent modes of social communication. We do not discuss these works here to discredit their pivotal contributions to P4/wC, but to highlight how unintentionally ableism can be perpetuated even when doing critical work—we have done it ourselves. Our intention is to call in these scholars to cultivate a more critical anti-ableist awareness and practice. We extend this call to others engaged in antiracist, decolonial, and childist work as we recognize how these systems engage with and reproduce ableism.

In addition to calling for a conscious and reflective engagement with these interlocking power dynamics, we align with scholars such as Annamma (2018) and Love (2019) in affirming loving and honoring as powerful forms of resistance.

We will elaborate on this further in our presentation of the CCRF later. Briefly, to love and honor disabled children of color is to combat epistemic injustice by operating from a place of presumed brilliance: recognizing the knowledge and resistance they create daily as valuable knowledge and honoring it as such. It is a return to the origins of P4/wC—the breaking down of the adult-constructed and maintained barrier separating children from philosophy (Froment, 2025; Lipman, 2011). In addition, recognizing the brilliance of made-marginalized children makes visible to us the naturalized norms that uphold supremacy and exclusion. Those of us with power can then actively use said power to act in solidarity (Baglieri et al., 2011; Kado, 2025; Love, 2019; Wall, 2024).

Educators are a group who have the power to disrupt and push to change larger inequitable systems, if they have the critical consciousness to do so. Resistance and refusal are enacted in myriad ways by different critical educators in different ways, depending on their individual role and capacity (Love, 2019; Neufeld et al., 2025). Educators love their students. But love without critical consciousness and reflection can replicate harm. Recognizing both systematic oppression and opportunities to resist lead us to teach and love on purpose.

building an epistemically just community of inquiry: the co-conspirator relationship framework

The proposed CCRF was developed in response to the educational and lived experiences of the authors, while drawing on the work done by educators and researchers in the fields of abolitionist teaching, DisCrit, and childism (First Author & Second Author, 2024). The first author is a cisgender female scholar-educator, working as a special education teacher at a U.S. public elementary school and a doctoral student in special education. She identifies as disabled, multiply-neurodivergent, and a mixed-race Chinese-American of immigrant origin. This list of labels means that she brings lived, professional, and research experience to the work as she navigates her simultaneously privileged and made-marginalized positions. The second author is a cisgender woman of Chinese descent who immigrated to the U.S. a little over a decade ago and has since experienced the process of racial minoritization. She identifies as an

able-bodied woman and scholar of color. Prior to entering academia, she taught in both general and special education settings, abroad and in the U.S. Her personal and academic experiences have profoundly shaped her commitment to surfacing and addressing interlocking systems of oppression in early childhood (special) education.

The CCRF was inspired by Annamma (2018)'s Pedagogy for Liberation, which is based around the interworking pillars of Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Solidarity.

The first author initially attempted to directly implement Annamma (2018)'s Pedagogy, but quickly became disenheartened as she ran into the reality that as a special education teacher within a public school system, she had no real influence over the curriculum selected by the district, and little over the pedagogical choices made by other staff. While she was developing a critical consciousness, she hadn't yet analyzed her own role and capacity. This created a real risk of burnout, as she saw the suffocating injustice in the world and feeling unable to empower students toward liberation. The first author found sustenance via looking at how she could empower and liberate within her specific role, instead of seeing progress as only meaningful on a systems level (Neufeld et al., 2025).

The first author refocused her efforts on what was within her control, critically and purposefully approaching her activity planning, small group setups, and dialogues with children to create a space where they felt loved, heard, and valued. It was later that she realized she was looking to build an epistemically just Community of Inquiry (CoI) to the greatest extent possible within her role. The CCRF is not meant to be a critique or replacement for the Pedagogy of Liberation (Annamma, 2018); instead, it is meant to be a relief for educators feeling powerless. The goal is to reempower educators so they are able to connect their daily work to the larger fight toward collective liberation.

The CCRF begins from a critical disability perspective due to the deep and continuing history of disability and race being used to codefine each other and pathologize the individual. Through DisCrit, the educator is called in to critically examine how and why norms of being are upheld in the classroom, from the physical environment to modes of communication (Annamma & Morrison, 2018;

Machado et al., 2024). Held alongside this is the childist and disability studies-derived lens that assumes the valuable knowledge and brilliance that children bring into the space (Baglieri et al., 2011; Machado et al., 2024; Wall, 2024). Simultaneously, there is the key term of co-conspirator and its implication of the teacher putting themselves on the line; the CCRF requires the active and risky work of not only recognizing, but countering injustice (Love, 2019). Figure 3 displays the pieces and purpose of the CCRF through the metaphor of leaves moving down a river, toward the ultimate goal of collective liberation. In the still-true words of Martin Luther King Jr., “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice anywhere...whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” (King Jr., 1964/2011). We freedom-dream towards a collective liberation free of injustice on any basis, and with no one left behind (Berne & Sins Invalid, 2019; Love, 2019).

There are four key aspects to the CCRF: solidarity, vulnerability, action, and critical self-reflection. While they seem linear here for ease of presentation, in reality all aspects are interdependent and often seem to be occurring simultaneously. Each aspect was identified with two main goals in mind. The first was to build on the work of (Lukey, 2004) and his question of how to meet the three conditions of dialogue (equality, empathy, and bringing assumptions into the open) while accommodating “other” (i.e. neurodivergent) modes of thinking (p. 28). Our intention is to move toward creating a CoI where dialogue not only occurs but is accessible to all in the community.

Secondly, the CCRF is rooted in purposeful love. It is not loving the idea of an abstract or idealized child, but loving the individual child as whole, complex, brilliant, and deserving of more—and acting on that core truth. It is actively working against internalized and external systems to give each child the best possible and to continually improve what the best possible is. It is difficult work, and it is worth it.

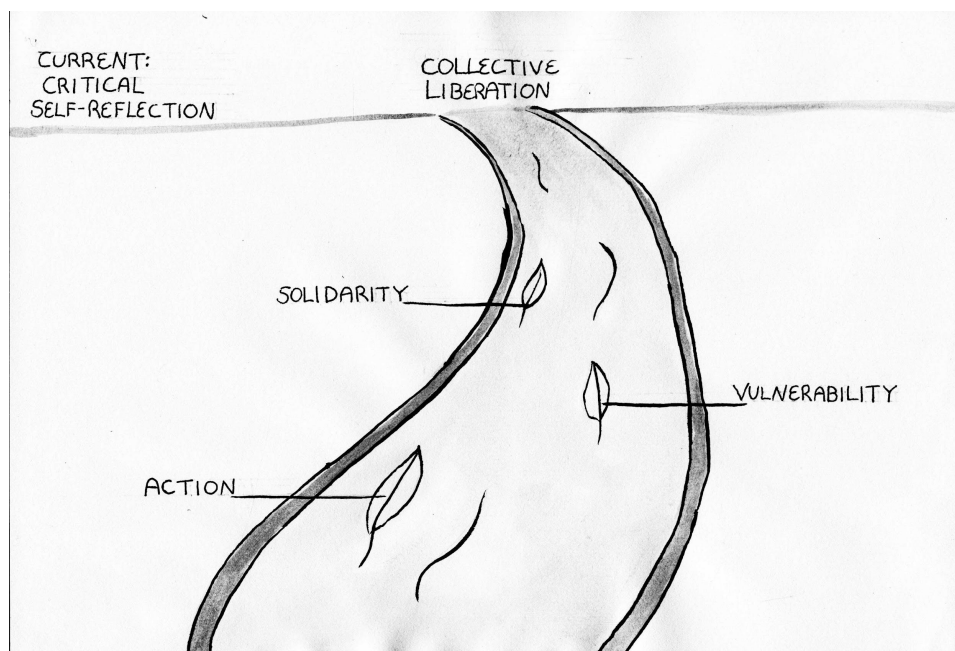


Figure 2: Key aspects of the co-conspirator relationship framework. **Source:** Anna Mei Piro.

solidarity

Solidarity is to receive and believe children, to hear them and be angry with them, not at, even and especially when they are not epistemically credible (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). Chetty (2018) details how the ideas of common sense and reasonableness are built on White ignorance of racial reality, resulting in excluding the realities of students from made-minoritized racial backgrounds in P4/wC practices. This denying of reality also occurs in a disability context, when a disabled person's physical or cognitive reality is rejected because it does not fit with the reasonable (abled) norm. These are both examples of epistemic injustice, when children's ability to be knowledgeable, even about their own reality, is doubted or even outright denied.

Yoon and Templeton (2019) reflect on how adults can impose their narratives and meaning-making onto children, intentionally or unintentionally, by using their power to assign epistemic credit. In one anecdote when children were asked to take photos and select specific ones to share, a researcher shared how they attempted to direct a child to share a photo the researcher found had more epistemic credit than others, as it had more traditional composition aspects and related to a topic the researcher found interesting. As a result, they nearly missed out on the important story the child herself had to share about care, and nearly perpetuated epistemic neglect (p. 76-78). It is on the educators to interrupt

epistemic neglect by holding space for children's brilliance. One useful practice for this is gently Socratic inquiry, a type of dialogue which emphasizes following children and their interests and values and is centered in P4CHI (Jackson, 2001; Kado, 2025). Analogous to the idea of the co-conspirator, Jackson (2001) reframes the educator as a co-inquirer (p. 460).

Additionally, what a student shares might be hindered or dismissed entirely because their mode of communication differs from what is 'acceptable'. One egregious example the first author encountered was an exchange between a fellow special educator and a five year old Black, autistic boy. The child, who had just been introduced to a communication tablet, was making displeased vocalizations and pushing at the educator's hands. The educator responded "if you want me to stop, you need to hit 'stop' on your tablet. I'm not stopping until you tell me to stop." Clearly, the child was communicating in a way the educator understood; yet the educator invalidated both the communication and the child's distress because it was not the educator's preferred mode of communication. In contrast, Everelles and Minear (2010) both centered a multiply-marginalized child, Cassie, and her mother as authorities on injustices in the school system and presented their uncensored. The researchers used the epistemic credit granted to them by academia to empower Cassie and her mother as knowledgeable, regardless of language convention. Is there a place for holding students to high grammatical and conversational expectations? Yes, especially when teaching students the skills they will need in order to be taken seriously when advocating for themselves and others. At the same time we hold space for the words of poet Adrienne Rich: "this is the oppressor's language/yet I need it to talk to you" (2018, p. 84). In moments of solidarity, we must lean on the inherent brilliance and knowledge of children and trust, rather than exert control.

vulnerability

Putting trust in children is also relevant to vulnerability. To trust is a vulnerable thing, especially within a system that is entirely built around the teacher holding power over the students. However, this is a constructed hierarchy. The childist construct of deep interdependence reminds us that all people, children

and adults, are reliant on others to make it through the world. A similar principle is outlined in the principles of disability justice (Berne & Sins Invalid, 2019): the ideas of independence and hierarchy were created and are enforced by the combination of capitalism and colonialism. They are ideas we must let go of when working toward collective liberation. Similarly, the White supremacist ideas of efficiency and perfection cause harm, especially when engaging in the complex and messy work of co-conspiracy (Love, 2019, 2023). Chetty (2018) argues the very concept of reasonableness is based in *White ignorance*, an active avoidance of discomfiting knowledge about historical and contemporary racism. This harmonizes with Annamma and colleagues (2017) term *color-evasiveness*, an active process of minimizing and ignoring the effects of racism in schooling contexts. Staying in this color-evasive space means not having to challenge the White supremacist status quo or invite uncertainty or discomfort into the space.

Vulnerability, then, is to deconstruct how the educator holds power over students and to invite in the discomfort. Lewis and Jainski (2021) name this the teacher-as-clown, “no longer someone who blesses or curses but rather opens up a space and time for the demand of language to be felt by the community” (p. 22). It is somewhat paradoxical that educators must leverage their power and epistemic credit to create and maintain an equitable CoI in which they give up said undue power and credit. Adding to this complexity, even as an educator attempts to give up their power for an equitable CoI, they must also maintain epistemic justice by preventing dominant and/or harmful views from overtaking the CoI and harming those made-marginalized within the community (Elicor, 2021; Rosas, 2023). This position is an uncomfortable and paradoxical one. The paradoxes are the point. There is no right answer, only the tension of simultaneous deconstruction of inequity and reconstruction of equity. The position is vulnerable and one co-conspirators live in.

Vulnerability also means putting oneself at risk. Resisting the systems of oppression that govern most aspects of education means causing trouble and drawing attention. In many ways, P4/wC and the CCRF run counter to the U.S. educational system’s priorities of raising test scores and lowering costs (Love, 2023). In addition, the U.S. government is currently putting serious effort into dismantling “DEI” (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) and “CRT” (Critical Race

Theory) in education. This creates formal, legal threats such as defunding programs and educators doing antiracist work in any capacity (Binkley, 2025; Binkley & Ma, 2025). Though currently blocked by a U.S. Supreme Court injunction, the United States Department of Education created a website encouraging people to directly report educators teaching “racial ideology” to the U.S. government (Samuels, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2025). This legal retaliation does not include the micro- and macro-aggressions educators may be subject to as a result of committing to the CCRF, or any practice which opposes White supremacy and the status quo.

The CCRF invites educators to recognize this reality, and then to do the work anyway. Our students are actively being harmed. We put ourselves on the line because they are worth it (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Love, 2019).

action

Action is a deliberately broad word here. Within the CCRF, action is making changes within your locus of influence and demanding change beyond it. It will look different for different educators in different contexts; a librarian may have little influence over professional development sessions but is able to respond to a co-worker’s racist comments in the breakroom, for example. At the same time, they would be able to demand change through advocating to those who do have influence over professional development, such as administrators or stakeholders in local government. There are not prescribed actions that P4/wC facilitators must take, but they must take actions toward empowering and liberating their students. While not in a P4/wC classroom, one example of a teacher empowering and valuing a student’s knowledge and way of being occurred in a preschool classroom. Park et al. (2021) observed a young Black autistic girl, Moirah, begin crawling on the floor during a class-wide dance break. Her teacher bent down to shield Moirah, using her hands and arms to prevent Moirah from being hit by the other dancing children while enabling her to safely engage in her way. Solidarity and vulnerability are built into this action: the teacher moved in solidarity, receiving and believing how the girl needed to participate, and made herself vulnerable not only by providing physical protection, but also letting herself be

seen in a potentially “unprofessional” way not only by her coworkers but outside researchers as well.

Similarly, Elicor (2020) took multiple meaningful actions while facilitating P4/wC with indigenous children in the Philippines. He reduced the power differential between himself and the children by admitting when he lacked knowledge and sharing personal anecdotes, deliberate actions that made him more vulnerable. He also acted in solidarity with and affirmed the children he worked with by speaking in the local dialect and wearing sandals to match those who could not afford uniform shoes. He was able to use his epistemic credit, granted to him as someone who attended higher education and now represented academia, to give epistemic credit to the children by demonstrating his alignment with them through action.

When speaking of action, we acknowledge that there are limits to the changes an individual can make. In the previous examples, the educators took action to make meaningful changes within their control. This does not mean giving up on injustices that are outside of one’s direct influence but recognizing interdependence and working with others to demand change. We see this in union membership, protests, and other forms of action with indirect impact. Writing this paper itself is a form of advocating for change beyond our influence, inviting readers we have never met to join the movement toward collective liberation.

While action takes many forms, it is required within the CCRF. A co-conspirator is not something you are, it is something you do (Love, 2019). There is no way to be in solidarity or vulnerability without engaging in action; without action, solidarity and vulnerability are meaningless.

critical self-reflection

In Figure 2, critical self-reflection is the river’s current. This is deliberate for multiple reasons. The first is to emphasize it is an active process. One cannot passively examine oneself or one’s actions, and one cannot ever be done doing so. Looking at the historical context demonstrates that not only have race, disability, childhood, and more been naturalized as lesser ways of being, this naturalization is foundational to the modern Western worldview. The creation of a natural order laid the groundwork for the sciences and the concept of the detached, “objective,”

viewpoint (Charmantier, 2020; Chetty, 2018; Elicor, 2020; Pratt, 2008). The sheer omnipresence of its influence renders it invisible, both externally and internally. It takes the practice of vigilance and effort to render it visible again; practice because it is never a perfected product, but a repeated process.

This critical self-reflection is the reason the rest of the CCRF works. It is infinitely more comfortable to remain in the status quo. The difficult truth is that as persons living under White supremacist systems of oppression, we have been rewarded for thinking and acting in alignment with these systems. Its omnipresence and explicit naturalization through the creation of the “natural sciences” ensured it. It is human and natural to fall into the patterns of thought and action that have been taught and rewarded through multiple means and throughout our lifetimes. It is impossible to be a perfect co-conspirator, but it is always possible to be a better co-conspirator. This requires the difficult work of awareness, from the large ideas of how we contribute to the systems we oppose, and the smaller ideas such as how tall and physically imposing we may appear to a young, made-minoritized student. When Elicor (2020) took meaningful actions when working in the Philippines, his actions were meaningful because he recognized how he appeared in relation to the children. It was being aware of his status markers in the specific context of that school, such as speaking English and wearing shoes, which empowered him to purposefully put himself in solidarity with the indigenous children there.

Critical self-reflection is a lifelong practice, yet it is never monotonous or futile. Engaging in this internal practice is something both authors have found to be empowering. It returns agency and professional judgment to the educator. We reject the idea that educators exist to be surveillance agents for oppressive systems or technicians, inputting curriculums with fidelity for the product of high-scoring students (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Beneke & Love, 2022; Love, 2023). Asking ourselves and other educators to reflect on and use their power is an affirmation that we, regardless of specific role or government mandate, have power. Educators always have this power.

Another invigorating aspect of critical self-reflection is that it empowers educators to love on purpose. Repeatedly, we and other authors have shown how

well-meaning, loving educators can recreate harm without critical consciousness. Engaging in this critical self-reflection empowers educators to understand what they can do and why they can do it—this action will increase access for this child, sharing this anecdote will make me vulnerable but will also demonstrate my solidarity with my CoI, and so on. The love that educators feel for the children in their care can be made manifest on purpose, with purpose.

why there is no CCRF curriculum

The CCRF can seem frustratingly vague, the diagram of a river and a few words. However, if we prescribed a series of actions and lesson plans to implement the CCRF, it would not be the CCRF. To be a co-conspirator is to be with the students you are with, as simple and complicated as that is. Matthew Lukey reflected that it was impossible to do P4/wC in the same way he had done with other students (Lukey, 2004). We challenge that it can never look the same, as the context and children will never be the same. We do not want to create a new set of norms to assert that students affected by x, y, and z need a, b, and c interventions (Froment, 2025). No child can be untangled from their specific intersection of identities and life experiences. At the same time, we can recognize and resist the oppressive systems rooted in White supremacy tangled around all of us (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). Instead of “how can I reproduce this process,” we pose “how am I in solidarity with the children in front of me? What actions are helpful for these children? How am I being vulnerable, here and now? What does philosophy with children look like, in *this* space, while I hold *this* role, with *these* children?”

The educator in the room is the only one who can answer these questions, and we trust them to do so. At the same time, as scholar-practitioners we have a few examples of when we felt most aligned with the CCRF. These are not examples of perfection, and not presented as something to emulate, but demonstrations of the principles in action.

concluding thought: CCRF in action

I crouch down in front of the student sitting on the bench. He is one of “my students,” a kindergartener qualified for an individualized education plan because of a disability affecting his learning. He is also a Black boy who just turned six, attending the “rough” and overcrowded public school where I work as a special education teacher. Most relevant to him right now, he has just pushed down one classmate and hit another.

His chest is heaving, tears and sweat rolling down his face. He is looking everywhere but at me.

“What happened?”

“I-I hit-”

“And?”

“And I pushed [Name] in the mud.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Because I’m mean!” he bursts out, fresh tears spilling over his eyelids.

“Because I have to be mean!”

“Why do you have to be mean?”

“My mind is mean,” he gasps, “and my body is mean. So I’m mean.”

“What’s mean?”

“I have to hit people! And push people! Because they wouldn’t play and they were being bullies and being mean. Dad says be mean to bullies. So I have to be mean.”

“[Name] and [name] were being mean. They didn’t play with you.”

“Yes!”

“And that made you sad?”

“It made me sad, and it made me mad, and I wanted to hit them, and I did.”

“Your brain had the idea to hit them and your body helped.”

“Yes!”

“Did you know that everyone has thoughts about hitting sometimes? Even teachers, even me. That does not make you mean.”

“I am mean!”

"Everyone has mean thoughts. That does not make you mean. You were upset, and you had a mean thought, and next time you do not have to do your mean thought. You are crying, and your breathing and heart are so fast, and you look so sad. You did not like doing something mean. It did not feel good. You do not have to be mean."

He turns his body away from me, folding his knees up to his chest and hiding his face. "I want a juice box."

"We can do that. Let's take some breaths, get a drink, and figure out what to do next."

reflection

While not in the traditional classroom setting, I chose to engage in gently Socratic inquiry (Jackson, 2001) and give my student the space to initiate and guide me down the philosophical inquiry that was on his mind. Despite the flaws with and my own discomfort with the special education system, I leveraged my own power as his special education teacher to shelter him from the initial punitive response to playground fights—the response that is known to be harsher on Black boys, and especially those in special education (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Connor, 2008; Harry & Klingner, 2014). I also knew at the time that leveraging this power and pushing against the typical handling made me vulnerable to push back and straining the relationships I have with the general education teachers and took on that risk to shield this student from harm.

Pushing and hitting is an age-appropriate action, and simultaneously one that I do not want to encourage. In the moment, however, I sat in solidarity with this student as he grappled with the philosophical inquiry that was clearly distressing him: *Are my mind and body mean? Do I have to be mean?* I received and responded to all the communication he was sharing with me—corporeal, emotional, and verbal. In the moment, I also made the choice to move away from open philosophical inquiry and actively combat the racist and ableist narrative my student was beginning to internalize: that as a neurodivergent, Black boy, he was inherently dangerous. Later, I would talk with him about keeping his hands to himself and practice ways to ask other children to play. In this moment, I made and held space to be with him and co-conspire against the systems around us.

This is not a perfect example, and neither author claims to engage in a perfect praxis. What we do is what educators around the world do, and continue the heavy, messy, daily work. Our hope is to continue to work as co-conspirators through uncertainty and cruelty and show up for the children with purposeful love. We invite you to join us.

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anna mei piro

Anna Mei Piro (she/her) is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and special education teacher. Her research interests include critical children's rights and the intersection of race and disability.

zhe gigi an

Zhe Gigi An is an assistant professor in the Department of Rehabilitation Psychology and Special Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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