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Commentaries & Perspectives

But What Must We Do in the Meantime? Urban (Teacher) Education in Onerous Times

H. Richard Milner IV
Vanderbilt University

We are in a moment of unprecedented challenges in education. Schools and universities—particularly schools and colleges of education—face significant threats to their very existence. Stark political and patrician divisions across the United States of America (US) have resulted in forms of financial and identity crises that PreK-12 school leaders, teachers, staff, community members, and policymakers must navigate, attempting to maintain some aspect of professional decision-making and judgement. In addition, many teacher education programs are facing significant decreases in enrollment, and grant funding of education research in universities has become increasingly tenuous. Many of us are hoping (and praying) that the situations we are facing in education and our world that threaten our pursuit of democracy will improve at some point. While we hope for a semblance of justice someday, we are concurrently pondering our present situation. That is, what do we do in the meantime? That is, what might we do as we hope for and pursue principles of democracy in the US?

Positioning Myself

Like others (Harding, 1991; hooks, 1984)¹ I believe my multiple and varied identities and those of others shape our research questions, how we enter research and conceptual framing, data collection, data generation and analyses, data interpretations, and knowledge dissemination (Milner, 2007; Milner et al, 2025). As researchers are constructing and attempting to add to our knowledge base, readers have a chance to assess, question, and confirm what is being forwarded as researchers share aspects of their identity, worldview, experiences, and contexts in relation to what is being addressed. As readers engage with this essay, I believe it is essential that they know and understand that I am a Black man, husband, father, son, brother, and professor of education. As a former high school English teacher, substitute teacher across PreK–12, and community college instructor in Developmental Studies, I have spent hundreds of hours observing and interviewing teachers, young people, care-givers, policymakers, and leaders about their work in education since 1998. As a father to two high school students, a professor who researches and attempts to help build knowledge about curriculum, instructional, relational, and assessment practices (Milner, 2020), I have written this essay drawing from my personal and professional, albeit subjective, insights on current matters we face and what we might do in this moment to ameliorate them.

Kirk and Floyd

Questions about patriotism and the value of (whose?) life are also under examination. The recent murder of Charlie Kirk has fueled another moment when teachers and parents are faced with uncertainty related to how best to support young people in dealing with violence and difference in a divided America. I have

¹ Much of the work amplifying the role of positionality emerges from feminism and Marxism. Black feminist scholars have particularly helped expand on researchers' role in knowledge construction (Dillard, 2000).

found that powerful process and outcome consequences can result when practicing teachers reflect about real questions such as:

- How do we check in with young people about how they are feeling about Charlie Kirk, his murder, and the murderer?
- Should teachers focus on students' thoughts, beliefs, and feelings of Charlie Kirk and his message?
- Or, do adults not engage at all with Charlie Kirk—even though we have been inundated with news, praises, and critiques around Kirk?

For sure, the ways that teachers use Kirk and similar public murders, such as that of George Floyd, as potential curriculum sites are essential and cannot be forwarded without deep deliberate planning with other educators, leaders, policymakers, families, communities, and young people to get it right.

Teachers and teacher educators are tasked with helping practicing teachers “do no harm” (Milner & Howard, 2026) and support students' learning and development academically, cognitively, affectively, emotionally, and behaviorally. The point here is not so much about Charlie Kirk or George Floyd as much as it is about the incredible strain and responsibility teachers and teacher educators face in real time, and what they must do when analogous moments to Charlie Kirk and George Floyd's death occur. As we try to figure out what is and is not acceptable, a pressing question for us is, “But what do we do in the meantime?”

Patriotism

Questions about patriotism and how we cultivate it in schools among young people are becoming common ones that PK-12 teachers, and consequently teacher educators, must face. Patriotism promotes an individual's or a community's commitment to, love for, and devotion to country. Overt and covert curriculum and instructional practices are already present in most traditional public (and other types of) schools across the US as well as in broader society. In most, if not all US schools, young people are expected to routinely recite the pledge of allegiance. At nearly every school-sponsored sporting event I have attended across the US has begun with the recitation of the the pledge, and/or a version of *America the Beautiful* or the *Star Spangle Banner*. But

even amidst these formal and informal practices, can patriotism really be taught? Or must patriotism be experienced? As we decide how—or whether—patriotism can be taught, what do we do in the meantime?

The question of “What do we do?” persistently lingers. The attempt to find good answers to complexities we face as education researchers, teacher educators, policymakers, theorists, community member, families, and young people is daunting at best. Indeed, as we pursue a democracy in the US, we may be all over the place trying to determine what to do, how we should proceed, and with whom. Answers about what we should do cannot be myopic and straightforward, given vast disparities in how communities are experiencing and observing strains in this moment. Thus, as individuals and communities who care about democracy and education, we may feel paralyzed—unable to move our work forward. So what must we do until things improve for humanity?

A Call to Study

The work ahead is difficult, especially in contexts that are most often marginalized, such as urban education and what I have called urban *emergent and intensive* environments (Milner, 2012) in particular. Challenges are far reaching and feel almost impossible to address. Rather than continuing to pontificate about the moment and movements we are experiencing, I have attempted to study more deeply to equip myself not only with tools to help others but to stay psychologically and emotionally stable. Elsewhere (Milner, 2025), I introduced an iterative, dynamic set of practices that I hoped might support teachers and teacher educators as they intentionally work against what I called *curriculum punishment*:² (1) Study, (2) Collaborate, (3) Reflect, (4)

² I define curriculum punishment as a “dangerous practice that can penalize students (and teachers) whose worldviews and actions do not align with dominant values, attitudes, beliefs, worldviews, and dispositions. What makes curriculum punishment so pernicious is the sometimes-hidden nature of it. Teachers may not well be aware of how they are reifying harmful practices because they are so deeply ingrained in their everyday way of living, learning, and engaging the world. . . curriculum that (a) does not meet young people’s needs, (b) is dull and stress-induced, and (c) forces students to relinquish or at best negotiate aspects of their interests and identities daily in districts, schools, and classrooms. . . curriculum punishment is a practice where young people (and teachers) are penalized for not being white, financially resourced, first language speaking, heterosexual, male, Christian, US-born, formally educated, and generationally privileged. Teachers engage in curriculum punishment intentionally and unintentionally. Curriculum punishment involves mishandling of power related to *what* students do and do not have an opportunity to learn” (p. 136).

Advocate, and (5) Transform (SCRAT). Not to suggest that studying is or will be the panacea for solving anti-democratic moves, I want to conclude this essay by focusing on the importance of studying during these times. While I outline the practices in much more depth in a *Journal of Teacher Education* article (Milner, 2025), and although the practices are not linear, I conclude this essay with a call to study in order to know more about what is necessary for us to do in policy and practice, as we pursue democracy and justice for all. We can learn much about this moment and these movements, realizing that much of what we are experiencing can be understood by looking at the past.

I stress the need for studying during these incredibly onerous times because reacquainting ourselves with research, theory, policy, and history are educative sites for our current situations. As we think about the work of teachers and teacher education in relation to Kirk, Floyd, and calls for patriotism, we must study powerful curriculum practices available in the literature, and we must talk and collaborate with families and communities. Studying what we learn through our discourse with elders, community leaders, everyday citizens, and one another provides an opportunity for us to recommit to our values and move towards practices of liberation.

While the work ahead will be difficult, we will be, I argue, better prepared when we commit to studying as we work in community to co-create worlds where every person in the US is able to live life in an ecosystem that helps to foster their psychological, emotional, cognitive, and physical health.

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H. Richard Milner IV is the Cornelius Vanderbilt Professor of Education in Peabody College of Education and Human Development and the Cornelius Vanderbilt Professor of Sociology in Arts and Science (secondary) at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. He addresses in more depth some of these issues in his new book, *The Race Card: Leading the Fight for Truth in America's Schools*. His email address is rich.milner@vanderbilt.edu.