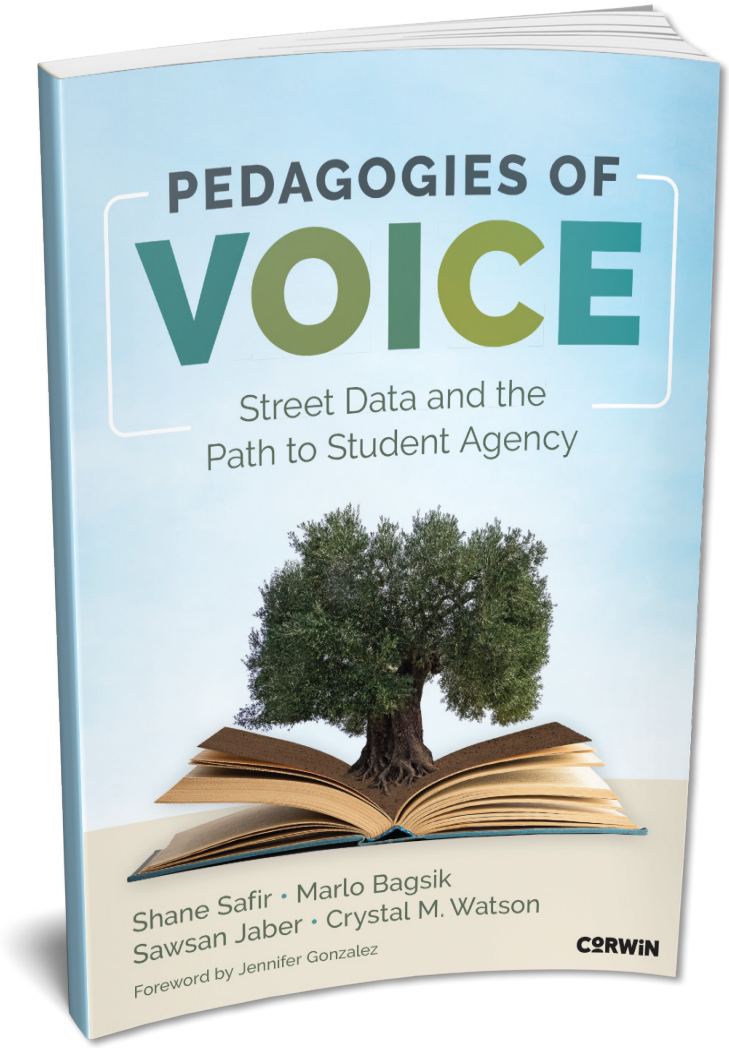

Thank you

FOR YOUR INTEREST IN CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from Pedagogies of Voice.

LEARN MORE about this title!

CORWIN

10 Toxins That Undermine a Pedagogy of Voice

3

Credo: We decolonize the classroom at every level.

Teaching Tales: When Toxins Seep In

Marlo's Story: *In my third year of teaching, I took a job as the ninth-grade English teacher for a well-known charter high school that I thought matched my values. The school claimed to serve marginalized populations by ensuring that students would receive a "rigorous education" with tools to succeed in post-secondary life. I quickly bought into the charter network's training and values while failing to realize that I was being coerced into controlling my students in almost every way. I became their poster child as my routines were filmed and used as exemplars in training modules. At the time, this visibility made me proud because I had swallowed the belief that "engagement" means every student is doing the same exact thing at the same time—producing! I felt I was becoming a better teacher. While there were moments of joy in my classroom, I look back and shiver to think of how I functioned as an instrument of dominance and control. My biggest concern was how uniform my classes and my students' behavior felt—were the kids sitting up, listening, asking and answering questions, nodding and tracking the speaker? My classes were so predictable and routinized that there was no space for me and my students to get to*

know each other. I was the teacher who didn't "crack a smile before Thanksgiving."

Sawsan's Story: *Five years ago, I was teaching 11th-grade English at a multiracial, multiethnic high school. I had transformed American Literature into a social justice course that would interrogate systems of oppression and develop students' capacity to become scholar activists. We read a diverse range of texts, and students shared their thoughts through critical conversations, creating their own original texts, and journaling about the authors' values, messages, and structural choices. A few months after the murder of George Floyd, we read a novel centering the contemporary Black American experience. The class had many opinions about police brutality and how we had reached this point as a nation, but it never occurred to me that I needed to offer a different processing space for students whose lived experiences mirrored that of the characters in the text. Lacking a racial affinity space, Black students were vulnerable to emotional harm from peers who were early in their equity journeys. One Black learner wrote a reflective essay about how difficult it was to sit in classes and feel any sense of belonging while listening to her non-Black peers make ignorant claims and anti-Black comments with little awareness of their impact. Reading her journal, I found it hard to breathe. The harm my lesson design had caused was right there in the Street Data of her written voice.*

Awakenings: Crystal's Corner

What toxic or problematic assumptions appear in each of the preceding teaching stories?

What pedagogical pitfalls did each educator fall into?

Think of a time when you experienced a pedagogical pitfall that separated you from your intentions as an educator. What was the impact on learner(s) at the margins?

For an olive tree to grow, thrive, and bear fruit, it must be rooted in clean, healthy soil. This soil is the invisible ethos of our classrooms. It's the

feeling in our bodies every time we enter a classroom and *sense* what students are experiencing. Our nervous systems know what's up, mirroring the vibration of the learning space. In a decolonized environment that is rooted in holistic, relational values, our bodies drop into the **parasympathetic nervous system**—that "rest and digest" network of nerves that relaxes after confronting stress or danger to once again experience safety. In such moments, we may smile, laugh, or breathe more deeply as our heart rate slows and the knots in our muscles untangle. On the flip side, walking into a classroom characterized by oppressive norms can activate our **sympathetic nervous system**, designed to protect us by initiating a fight, flight, or freeze response to danger. In these moments, our bodies mirror what students may be feeling: anxious, disconnected, silenced, even fearful. In some ways, the soil is also *us*. . . . It's the energy we infuse into the learning space, consciously or unconsciously.

In the last chapter, we grounded ourselves in core concepts from *Street Data*, which sits as a foundation for Pedagogies of Voice. We thought about the various levels of data we can collect to inform our pedagogy, dynamic ways to gather Street Data, and what it means to choose the margins of our classrooms. We surveyed existing data to identify the margins and hone an equity-centered inquiry question to guide our learning. As we get ready to enter the Pedagogies of Voice Seed Store in Chapters 5 to 8, we must first prepare the soil of our learning spaces for planting. This requires *detoxification*, the focus of this chapter, and *soil replacement*, the focus of Chapter 4.

No matter who we are, how we identify, or how committed we are to the pursuit of equity and inclusion, we have all been conditioned inside a colonial education system that has survived through the reproduction of dominant cultural ways of knowing and being. Marie Battiste, a Mi'kmaw scholar from Potlotek First Nations, unpacks the features of a **colonial education**, rooted in the "racial logic" of white supremacy, including forced assimilation, a Eurocentric chokehold on knowledge and curriculum, privileging "English-only" initiatives while banishing other languages, and white-washing of the mind (Battiste, 2013). In this chapter, we examine the micro-ecology of the classroom to discern how power operates in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, enacting systems of control over learners and sustaining oppressive, often invisible norms. For the coherence of our central metaphor, the olive tree, we are calling these norms *soil toxins* that make the classroom an unsafe and unhealthy place for students and educators to grow together.

No matter who we are, how we identify, or how committed we are to the pursuit of equity and inclusion, we have all been conditioned inside a colonial education system that has survived through the reproduction of dominant cultural ways of knowing and being.

Decolonizing Our Classrooms

In Chapter 5 of *Street Data*, Shane described a **pedagogy of compliance** that dominates many classrooms, particularly at a secondary level, and is characterized by lecture-style instruction, Eurocentric bias, students in rows looking toward the teacher as expert, and teachers carrying the cognitive load. This model minimizes dialogue between teacher and student and among students. In a similar vein, Paolo Freire detailed a **banking model of education**, which positions the teacher as subject and active participant and the students as passive objects. Banking education is a process of depositing knowledge into students' brains, with little attention to their preexisting knowledge and schema. The reality that students come with "funds of knowledge" (Gonzalez et al., 2005) and deep cultural wealth—all fertile sources of Street Data—is actively disregarded in this model. Instead, it aims to develop students into "adaptable, manageable beings. . . . The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them" (Freire, 1970). Compliance is the end game.

TABLE 3.1 Shifting From a Pedagogy of Compliance to a Pedagogy of Voice

	FROM A PEDAGOGY OF COMPLIANCE . . .	. . . TO A PEDAGOGY OF VOICE
Primary Form of Data	Tests and quizzes (traditional assessments)	Street data (formative assessments, performance-based assessments)
Core Belief	Hierarchy of power: teacher wields expertise and distributes "content"	Democratization of power: teacher and students build knowledge together
Core Instructional Approach	Lecture-style dissemination of information	Active learning through inquiry, dialogue, projects, simulations, etc.

	FROM A PEDAGOGY OF COMPLIANCE . . .	. . . TO A PEDAGOGY OF VOICE
Roots in Critical Pedagogy	Freire's banking model of education	Freire's problem-posing model of education
Roots in Culturally Responsive Education	Rests on invisible norms of dominant culture (quiet, compliant, task oriented, individualistic) Views marginalized students through a deficit lens: *What gaps can I fill?*	Rests on foundation of collectivist cultures (collaborative, interdependent, relational) and includes students' cultural references in all aspects of learning Views marginalized students through an asset lens: *What gifts do you bring?*
Views Students as . . .	Vessels to fill with information	Culturally grounded critical learners

Source: Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation by Shane Safir and Jamila Dugan. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

With this book, we are aspiring to create the conditions for a Pedagogy of Voice to flourish so that our beautiful grove of olive trees can bear the fruit of deep learning. In order to shed a pedagogy of compliance, we must actively decolonize our classrooms by rooting out the toxins polluting the soil. This requires acknowledging that "the modern educational system was created to maintain the identity, language, and culture of a colonial society" (Battiste, 2013). **Decolonization** is a conscious process of uplifting learner voice while systematically expunging toxic and dehumanizing forces, including the following:

- Eurocentric assumptions around knowledge and data
- Ideologies rooted in hierarchy, ranking, and domination
- Learning conditions that position students as passive receivers of educator expertise
- Normalized pedagogical "moves" that harm and silence learners

In this chapter, Sawsan and Shane unpack 10 Toxins that can infect our classrooms and undermine a Pedagogy of Voice. The toxins, collectively, work to suppress student and teacher voice by forcing compliance with policies, practices, and behavioral norms that perpetuate existing power dynamics and inequities. They are the product of a system designed to privilege the dominant majority by suppressing the voices and spirits of those at the margins. We hope that by seeing them

clearly—making visible what is often invisible—you can attune to their presence in your learning environment and begin to consciously disrupt them.

A pedagogy of compliance will stubbornly reinvent itself into new images, rhetoric, and mechanisms of control. Think of the histories of residential schools, cultural and linguistic assimilation, English-only programs, test-and-punish initiatives, and punitive teacher evaluation systems. The latest wave of compliance-focused policies, including the banning of books and silencing of conversations about race, sexuality, and gender identity, not only detracts from instructional decision-making, but harms students in the process. Sometimes those with positional power cleverly coopt language, claiming to pursue "equity" while perpetuating oppressive practices.

10 Toxins

> *All the bad words said about a community that occupy the space, that have gone on said, stay in there and if you breathe those things in deep enough, they become so toxic that they taint your visions of possibilities of doing something for young folks in their lives, and you have to be able to take stock of that data . . . the data that is unseen, that is in the air. And the reason why some classes feel good is because somebody's done the work to clear the space. And some classes feel bad because somebody has not addressed what's in that space and no matter how good they think they are, no matter where their graduate school of education is, no matter what their background is that they think they are equipped to do the work, but you ain't cleared the space, Beloved, and if you ain't cleared the space, you gonna inherit somebody else's trauma and wonder why the kids ain't learning from you.*
>
> —Christopher Emdin, Episode 2, *Street Data Pod*
> https://qrs.ly/77g91xo

Because of the shape-shifting nature of oppressive policies and practices and the "gaslighting" language used to justify them, we have to get sharper and smarter in our analytics while finding our locus of control. This chapter offers language to notice and name what's at play, alongside Street Data in the form of *signature practices* and *discourses* that carry these toxins. (See Table 3.2 for a thumbnail sketch.)

TABLE 3.2 Signature Practices and Discourse of the 10 Toxins

TOXIN	SIGNATURE PRACTICES	DISCOURSE
1. Teacher-as-expert	Over-reliance on lecturing Planning a year of curriculum over summer with no room for student input Content gatekeeping	"I know what's best for you." "I have chosen the texts for our course; I'm sure you'll enjoy them." "This is what we need to learn this year. No negotiations." "I have chosen this book for you because it represents your experience."
2. Binary thinking	Closed-ended quizzes Behavior charts or red, yellow, green cards for behavior management "Good kid"/"bad kid" labeling in teacher meetings before school year	"This student *can't* learn." "I *can't* serve this child. She's just not a strong student." "Here is the answer. Copy it down." "These kids are just different. Nothing I do works with them."
3. Deficit ideology	Racialized grouping and tracking Negative language or thinking about students/families at the margins Justifying low-rigor or highly rigid curriculum as "what the students need"	"He doesn't even try! So why should I try to help him?" "These parents/kids just don't care." "She clearly has better things to do than study." "Their culture expects *x* or *y*." "If he was not in my class, it would solve so many problems!"
4. Power over	Teacher at the front, students in rows Classroom rules with no student voice Grading behavior for compliance	"You are speaking out of turn." "I gave you the grade you deserve . . . take it or leave it." "No, you can't just use any bathroom/pronouns that you want to."[1] "This is *my* classroom, and you will follow the rules or leave." "You can't join that program. You're not Honors material."
5. Competitiveness and rugged individualism	Overemphasis on individual tasks Overemphasis on homework Barring students from helping each other work on tasks Class ranking and/or appointment of valedictorians	"You've gotta learn how to solve this problem on your own." "In the 'real world,' no one is gonna hold your hand."

(Continued)

[1]Note that since this manuscript was drafted, this type of statement is now enshrined in federal policy and backed up by executive orders.

(Continued)

TOXIN	SIGNATURE PRACTICES	DISCOURSE
6. Containment	Sit-and-get modes of instruction Banning movement in the classroom Sending students out of class who get up and move about the room Absence of field trips, field study, and/or land-based learning	"Stop moving around the room! You're distracting the class." "No, we can't go outside during class. That's what lunch is for." "We need to put your son in an intervention class for 'at-risk' learners."
7. Performing over learning	Standardization of curriculum (one-size-fits-all curriculum) Pacing guides Emphasis on "bell-to-bell" instruction Grading on a curve	"We don't have time for questions; we are behind in the curriculum." "Your priority is preparing for the test."
8. One-and-done assessment	Banning revisions and retakes Overemphasis on summative tests Absence of regular wise feedback	"There will be no retakes of this quiz. If you're not ready, it's on you." "Let's see who got the right answer." "If you had paid attention . . . ." "Stop asking for concessions and retakes. In the real world, there are no second chances, and it's unfair to your peers."
9. Scarcity mindset	Pull-out interventions Rote instruction to "boost skills" Eliminating rigor to make learning more "accessible" Content coverage: more is more	"We have a lot to cover so please sit quietly and take notes." "No matter what we do, students have so many gaps we can never catch up." "It's not my fault that they're coming to me five levels below their grade. What am I supposed to do with that?"
10. Ego	Gatekeeping content/choosing texts (or "real-world" tasks) based on teacher interests Defensiveness to student feedback	"When you've put in the work like me to get a degree and a job, you get to be the one to make decisions." "This is the way I learned it, and kids need to know about it!" "There are some things kids just need to know because they don't know better." "I already passed __ grade. *You* need this content, not me."

1. **Teacher-as-expert:** Sawsan remembers her first university lecture hall experience: 365 students in a women's studies class. She was a 16-year-old freshman, having graduated from high school early—nervous and not knowing what to expect. Her teacher had assigned a novella with a female Arab protagonist and directed students to read it by the next class. Sawsan was thrilled to *finally* read a book with a mirror of her reality, but in fact, the text was chock-full of insulting stereotypes and patently offensive. In the middle of the next class lecture, the teacher singled her out and said, "I want to know what *you* think because I am sure you could relate to her more than anyone else here." Sawsan was dumbfounded and speechless. She could not find her voice.

   When we assume the role of teacher-as-expert, we become gatekeepers of student experience—what they learn and don't learn and the shaping of their **self-concept**, or how they view themselves personally and in relation to the stigmas of external, societal perceptions. We make grave mistakes—like this professor who thought that she understood Sawsan's lived experiences. Most tragically, we neglect to see our students as a living, breathing resource that we can learn from every day. So many teachers have been conditioned to believe we have to be the experts in the classroom space, and "expert"-laden practices like talking *at* students and pre-recording lessons became even more popular post-COVID pandemic with the frenzy around "learning loss."

   In her instructional coaching, Sawsan often asks teachers to choose *one* period in which to track their minutes of talk time versus the time they provide students to exchange in discourse. Try gathering this type of Street Data for a week and examine what it indicates about who you view as the experts in the room. It can be illuminating! What if every student felt like they were an expert too? How would this shift not only the culture of schooling but students' self-concepts? This is particularly important for learners at the margins who have often had their voices silenced or who have been spoken *for* by adults. If Sawsan's professor had allowed her to be the expert of her own lived experience, she might have felt empowered to show her peers how problematic the novel was. Instead, she folded into herself and chose not to speak at all.

2. **Binary thinking:** Colonial education is rooted in the toxic soil of binary thinking. Learners are ranked and sorted into categories like "good" and "bad" or "high" and "low;" answers are deemed "right" or "wrong," and educational policies like grading and

discipline are shaped around these dichotomies. As institutions designed to assimilate students into the dominant culture, schools often perpetuate binary modes of thinking about knowledge, success, and behavior. Sawsan remembers being a nervous first-year teacher, just 19 herself, preparing to teach 18-year-old seniors. Her mentor teacher had taught many of Sawsan's students the prior year, so the mentor printed the class roster and began reading their names out loud, labeling each student as either a "good kid" or a "bad kid." Sawsan recalls walking into the first day of class with her guard up, worried about all of the supposedly "bad kids" she would meet (mostly boys, incidentally). She set up strict rules to "hold the kids accountable," but this approach failed miserably. With time, she learned that establishing authentic relationships and finding common ground with students would deem her the coolest, youngest teacher in the school and that in fact, there are no "bad kids." That very idea stems from a colonial mindset aimed at excluding those who aren't docile and compliant.

Binary thinking—for example, having students shade a bubble from a narrow band of answers, insisting students identify as "male" or "female," or using behavior charts to code student behavior as "good" or "bad"—results in erasing the complexity of human experience and constricting how learners are allowed to be and express themselves in the classroom. This may seem innocuous at face value, perhaps even coded as "effective classroom management," but it can cause great harm and shame to a child's budding self-concept. How can there be one right answer when there are ten ways to explain a response? How can a teacher guess what a student was thinking when they shaded a bubble if the student has no opportunity to explain their choice? Why can't children self-identify across a gender spectrum when *countless* cultures throughout history have seen gender as dynamic and fluid?[2] Can't a learner have both positive *and* challenging attributes?

[2]There are countless examples of cultures in which gender is understood on a fluid spectrum rather than as a binary. Many Indigenous cultures in North America recognize two-spirit people, a term encompassing a variety of gender roles and identities among different nations. The Hijra in South Asian countries, including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, are recognized as a third gender and hold a unique socio-cultural role, often engaging in rituals and blessings as well as performances. Fa'afafine individuals in Samoa are assigned male at birth but embody both masculine and feminine traits. They are deeply respected within Samoan culture, often taking on specific social roles. And the Gurjira in some West African cultures are individuals who embody both male and female characteristics, positioned in important communal roles that defy strict gender norms.

People are not two-dimensional. If we commit to awakening student agency, we must view students in their full dimensionality and invite them to share their lived experiences, views, values, and identities. Sawsan begins each year telling her students that there are no wrong answers as long as they can ground their work in a "why." Binary thinking is a barrier to understanding nuance, ambiguity, and shades of gray—precisely the skills needed to navigate a complex world.

3. **Deficit ideology**: With the numbers of multilingual learners growing in her district, Sawsan has spent a lot of time this year thinking about how her English department can shift its practices to better serve this population. So many of their remediation courses are overpopulated with brown students who are multilingual learners (MLs), many of whom are dually labeled as special education. Like many schools, Sawsan's has failed to differentiate between English language development and academic ability, which has resulted in the disproportionate placement of MLs in courses with low academic rigor. How often do our perceptions of academic "readiness" get distorted by deficit-based views of MLs and students with learning differences? Similarly, how often do we blame Black and brown students for a lack of "engagement" when *we* have failed to plan culturally relevant and sustaining learning experiences that speak to their interests and identities?

   Think about the ways in which our education system justifies the unequal distribution of opportunity through deficit narratives. Examples abound, such as grading policies, reserving rigorous instruction for our most privileged students, and course tracking systems that wind up foreclosing access to higher education for learners in lower "tracks." Similarly, how often do we show respect for children who don't fit the norms of a compliant, so-called "good student"? How often do we affirm their *strengths* by witnessing qualities that are undervalued by current measures, such as bravery, creativity, resourcefulness, resilience, or simply the ability to survive a toxic system that was never designed to serve them in the first place? How can we rid ourselves of deficit-based narratives about learners at the margins? It is no surprise that Black, brown, multilingual, and students with learning differences are grossly overrepresented in "lower" tracks and intervention programs and that the lack of student achievement in those spaces is then attributed to the failure of students and their families! This is a vicious, toxic cycle that we must commit to disrupt as

we decolonize our practice. When we begin to recognize and acknowledge the funds of knowledge our students bring to the learning space, we make space for their voices.

Think about a student in your class who concerns you the most—the student who appears to be the most *dis*engaged or who others have labeled "at risk." Rather than thinking about what this student *lacks*, focus on what you perceive as their strengths. If you're not sure, write down three asset-based questions to ask them in an empathy interview, such as *What do you love about yourself? What do you admire about your community, culture, and/or family? What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?* They may not fit the conventional trope of "good student," but what might you discover if you free yourself from such preconceptions? Such small shifts in our thinking become the basis of decolonization.

4. **Power over**: Students will always ask for our "why": *Why do we have to learn this? Why this book? Why is this math skill important?* In observing colleagues, Sawsan can't count how many times those legitimate "why" questions from students were met with, "Because I said so." This response points to a culture of domination and a form of marginalization permeating so many classrooms. Leticia Nieto defines "power over" as a normative type of power that is largely unconscious and systemic, built on force, coercion, domination and control, and motivating change through fear (Nieto, 2010; personal communication, December 2024). The power over toxin not only strips students of voice and choice, it hinders them from actively engaging in their learning. Why should they engage in something for which they have no rationale or stake in its relevance? As an educational consultant in addition to being a classroom teacher, Sawsan walks through schools all around the world. It never fails to surprise her how many classrooms are physically organized to assert the power of the teacher *over* learners by placing students in rows with the teacher at the front. (The pedagogy of Circle Up in Chapter 6 is a powerful antidote to this tendency.) By extension, instructional practices that posit there is only one "right" answer or way to approach a problem (see Binary Thinking) convey to learners that the teacher's perspective reigns supreme. Such manifestations of power may disenfranchise students in the moment, but think about the *cumulative* impact on children and adolescents during their formative years. How does the ongoing absence of voice and agency influence personality development and self-confidence? In what ways are we setting

children up to be compliant or submissive in other areas of their lives?

Examples of power *over* students are not limited to pedagogical practices; they are evident in our choice of materials. As a curriculum director, Sawsan often found herself saying to teachers, "Even if you love this text, we need to consider removing it if the students cannot relate to it. How can we gather Street Data on *their* perspectives?" In many schools, students are still steeped in reading canonical texts that portray historically marginalized groups through a deficit frame. How does this experience impact students' self-concepts and perceptions of *others* in the world? In STEM classrooms, teachers may march through a prescribed curriculum instead of reimagining the content for mathematical or scientific relevance by anchoring in student experience, the community, and/or the land. (See the integrative case study at the end of the book for a holistic example of land-based learning.) Many teachers spend a disproportionate amount of time on their favorite topic because it feels comfortable to teach when, in fact, it translates into little **real-world** relevance for students.

5. **Competitiveness and rugged individualism:** Competitiveness and rugged individualism is a prevailing mindset in many classrooms and schools that prioritize individual achievement and success over collaboration, community, and collective well-being. These values act as a toxin by fostering environments where students are pitted *against* one another rather than encouraged to work together, share perspectives, and engage in co-constructed learning experiences.

   This toxic focus on individualism stifles collaboration, hinders authentic self-expression, and limits opportunities for students to exercise agency in shaping their learning experiences. At the same time, it effaces the fact that many learners from racialized[3] backgrounds come from cultures that celebrate **communalism**—social organization on the basis of community and interdependence. Indigenous and Black traditions across the diaspora, for example, weave communalism with an appreciation and valuing of the ancestors to form the foundations of family, education, government, and virtually all social structures.

[3]The word "racialized" connotes the ways in which language is used to colonize, racialize, and commodify the *other*, or the person or learner who has the least power in the space.

As an Arab, your last name holds more value than your first name because it ties you to community and history, indicating your lineage and ancestry. This is one of many reasons Sawsan struggled as a young student with the emphasis on the self-centered "I" in schooling and why so many of her peers could not understand her constant and frequent interactions with her large extended Arab family. Growing up in the diverse world of 1980s Brooklyn, New York, she prided herself on the internal and external communities that she belonged to, but they also made her stand out in her school community, offering more reasons to be seen and labeled as "the other." Whenever she had a dance festival or a graduation, the entire Jaber clan showed up.

Sawsan's cultural wealth also enabled her to be successful in school when working as a member of a group, team, or larger community. She thrived when asked to consider how her work on a project or task would impact others beyond herself. However, most of her learning experiences glorified individualism. From the exaltation of the American dream to the emphasis on individual grades, schooling seemed rooted in *personal* gain and benefit rather than an ethos of community. The American philosophy of the rugged individual crossing the frontier, intertwined with the ideology of Manifest Destiny, continues to show up in classroom cultures rife with isolation and competition.[4] When we place more value on what students can accomplish *individually* than on what they can achieve *collectively*, these subliminal messages find their way into society beyond schools.

PoV PD Resource

QR Code 7
https://qrs.ly/slg99ld

Listen to Sawsan's student Shivesh share his counterstory about navigating collectivist and individualistic cultural norms as a South Asian young person.

6. **Containment:** The containment toxin is the physical embodiment of colonial education. Just as Indigenous, Black, and other communities of color have historically been displaced,

[4]Manifest Destiny was a 19th century ideology that the United States was pre-destined to expand across North America. Coined in 1845, this term and belief system was used to justify the forced removal and genocide of Indigenous peoples from their homes.

dispossessed, enslaved, and confined to increasingly small spaces, our classrooms—especially in marginalized communities—often act as microcosms of this larger system of control. In compliance-centered school buildings, students frequently have to enter through metal detectors and are subjected to bag searches. In compliance-centered classrooms, learners are confined to their seats for most of the class period. Instruction is "contained" inside the four walls of the classroom. Assessment is "contained" within a quiz, test, or bubble sheet, and the only learning that "counts" is contained within the school building. We miss infinite opportunities to cultivate student voice and agency when we default to this incarcerated view of learning, one that misses the forest for the trees. In truth, learning happens everywhere!

Shane remembers her first years as a teacher in southeast San Francisco when she tried to grab every opportunity she could to take her students beyond the school building. They sat outside in circles to read and discuss articles. They traveled to Angel Island to study the history of Chinese immigration and detention. In the pre-law course she had an opportunity to design from scratch, her students visited four Bay Area schools—public and private, suburban and urban—to investigate structural inequities in education. Each time they left the building together, she felt the weight of the social scripts of "teacher" and "student" melt away as the class built deeper connections. Not only did her students' cognitive development and schema-building benefit from activating the world as their text, their relationships and class community grew stronger. She stays in touch with many of these former students and hosted two on *Street Data Pod*. Visit https://qrs.ly/oxg99ly to listen to "Connecting Present to Past: The Impact of Critical Pedagogy," in which Shane's former students talk about the lasting impact of their high school experiences (Safir & Mumby, 2022c).

In an era in which teachers are increasingly attacked and micro-managed for inclusive curricular choices and holding discussions on "controversial" topics, staying inside the safety of the classroom and scripted lesson plans is understandably seductive. We may subject our students to long lectures to ensure we "cover" all the content. We may skip a compelling field trip so that we don't "fall behind" on a unit of instruction. We may ask students to work at their solitary desks because we are anxious about their performance on an upcoming test. The invitation here is to notice the subtle ways in which the containment toxin has seeped into

your mindset and practices and to start to root it out. Give yourself, and by extension your learners, room to breathe, grow, and literally stretch your bodies! Expand outward into the vast terrain of learning beyond the classroom, and you'll see student voice sprout up organically in ways you never anticipated.

7. **Performing over learning**: Standardized testing represents the tip of the colonial iceberg, a visible toxin that emphasizes student "performance" over growth and learning. Even as the testing regime weakens, many districts and classrooms remain trapped inside its wicked imagination. Take, for example, a district leadership meeting that Shane facilitated in which urban district leaders made claims such as "Kids still need to know how to take tests for college" and "You'll have to take tests at every phase of life" to argue for continuing a test-centered assessment model. Aside from the fact that these assertions represent a retrograde version of "college" and "life," scholar Linda Darling-Hammond reminds us in Episode 10 of *Street Data Pod* that most real-world jobs don't operate in a multiple-choice model, asking listeners to consider, "What kind of job gives you five options and says, 'Now pick one'?" (Safir & Mumby, 2023a).

PoV PD Resource

QR Code 8
https://qrs.ly/kxg99oc

In this clip from Episode 10 of *Street Data Pod*, thought leader and policymaker Linda Darling-Hammond defines performance-based assessment and challenges the ongoing obsession with multiple-choice assessment models.

Awakenings: Crystal's Corner

What stands out from Dr. Darling-Hammond's description of this form of assessment?

How have *you* seen assessment act as a toxin and barrier to student voice and agency?

What are small ways you could move in this direction in your classroom?

A focus on performing over learning leads to a standardization of curriculum, stripping teachers and students of agency, as well as to a pervasive fear of making mistakes. In the face of narrow and rigid definitions of success, students don't want to take risks or activate their creativity. Mistakes become stigmatized, and learners who struggle to fit the dominant mold enter cycles of shame and self-blame. The same students who feel frustrated with their lack of academic success may become "frequent flyers" with disciplinary referrals to the main office. For teachers, the anxiety associated with performance pressures can lead to a doubling down on tools like pacing guides, "bell-to-bell instruction," and content gatekeeping. When teachers are driven by carrot and stick measures in the interest of student gains on narrowly designed assessments, both teacher and student voice suffer. Only students who know how to "do school" in a compliance-driven way will survive in this toxic milieu.

Decolonizing our practice means building a culture that centers *learning* over performing and rewards mistake-making as a vehicle *for* learning. By rooting out the performative aspects of learning, we reorient the larger purpose of schooling: preparing students to become active citizens in a global world. Authentic public learning assessments, profiled in Chapter 8, produce a sort of "curriculum equity" (Safir & Mumby, 2023c) by providing all learners access to high levels of attainment.

8. **One-and-done assessment**: Whenever Sawsan talks to teacher teams about assessment, she asks, *Why* are we assessing? A colonial mindset views assessment through a punitive lens: If kids "know" the content (we can debate whether knowledge exists in such a finite way), we reward them, and if they don't, we punish them. But this still doesn't answer the "why" question. Ask yourself this: why do we want kids to come to school anyway? Some may argue that we want them to gain skills for the job market. Even if that were the case, ask yourself whether the actual content you are assessing provides them with the skills that today's employers claim they want students to have, such as creativity, communication, and interpersonal skills. You can visit https://qrs.ly/f2g99p7 to read *Ed Week's* article on "5 Things Big Businesses Want Students to Learn for the Future of Work" to learn more on this topic (Davis, 2020).

   Unfortunately, the educational obsession with rugged individualism and perfectionism has led to a predominance of closed-ended, one-and-done assessments that limit students'

opportunities to learn, grow, and develop their voices. Schools have the power to reshape society by cultivating global citizens, expansive thinkers, and scholar activists who can interrogate the world and make it better. If that is our mission, how can we better align assessment toward this North Star?

A decolonized approach to assessment includes students demonstrating and reflecting on what they know, understand, and care about as they step into positions of agency. This is operationalized through dynamic moments of *making learning public* before an audience, a focal pedagogy we will explore in Chapter 8. Such an expansive approach to assessment generates rich Street Data on student learning so that as we listen to students, we can determine responsive pedagogical moves. Decolonizing assessment means that we commit to disrupt the one-and-done mentality, which signals to learners that if they didn't "get it" the first time, too bad and move on. Many teachers will argue that retests and revisions take too much time and work. But think of how much *less* work we would have to do if students mastered key concepts and skills over time through a spiraling approach that values exploration and iteration. Think of the long-term return when this happens over a span of years. Allowing for multiple revisions and retakes until a child fully grasps the content would shift education completely. It would elevate the conversation from "filling gaps" in learning to providing opportunities for students to show what they know in increasingly complex ways. It would elevate student agency through the critical question, What can learners actually *do* with the content we have been studying?

9. **Scarcity mindset**: Since the pandemic, our field has been riddled with conversations about how much students "fell behind" in the COVID-19 era. An alarmist, scarcity-based undercurrent shapes this discourse. Here is Sawsan's read, based on her own students and the hundreds of students she has listened to in focus groups: Before COVID, traditional teaching didn't serve children at the margins. After COVID, traditional teaching didn't serve *anyone*. We are finally paying attention to the ineffectiveness of a pedagogy of compliance, but instead of getting to the root of the problem and transforming our approaches, we are placing a "learning loss Band-Aid" on it, hoping for a quick fix. Learning loss is the contemporary embodiment of a scarcity mindset, positing that we must race to fill gaps rather than slow down to adjust our methods.

   This discussion begs the question, *What constitutes learning anyway, and how do we measure it?* Sawsan wagers that

students came back from COVID much more aware of world events after all they had witnessed, including the public execution of George Floyd. While Floyd was far from the first Black man to be murdered by police, his death transpired during a time when people were confined to their homes and locked into their screens. As international criticism rose around the inaction of our governing bodies, many students began to cultivate a deep curiosity about justice. They read and researched and came back to school armed with critical questions, ready to engage in thoughtful speaking and listening. She cannot recall a period of time in her twenty-plus years of teaching when reading and writing had more meaning. What if we simply asked students, "What do you learn outside of school that has personal or cultural value to you?" The big idea here is that we need to constantly redefine what we consider valid ways of knowing and learning.

To hear more from students about what they feel they learned during the pandemic, visit https://qrs.ly/fwg99pq (Kirshner et al., 2021). If your school or district is feeling stuck in the "learning loss"' discourse, this article can help to reframe the conversation.

Our students may have lost some ground in terms of traditional skills, but what about all the learning that is *gained* through time with family, elders, and in community? In truth, it's impossible to quantify the many "life lessons" that children receive outside of school—some painful and others less so, but all important. Measuring learning in narrow, standardized ways has resulted in so many students being placed into the hamster wheel of interventions—over tested, pulled out, placed in isolating remediation bubbles where they get trapped. So-called "learning loss" structures replace much-needed electives and even study halls in a time when, more than anything, we need to cultivate students' learning *love*.

10. **Ego**: In the context of teaching, ego has a particular meaning: When a teacher's sense of self-importance and need to be perceived as the "expert in the room" actually inhibits their students' opportunities to learn. Sawsan will never forget the day a student in her then-primarily white district announced in front of the whole class: "My father says you are a terrorist." This was during the first Trump era, and Sawsan was the only Muslim, hijabi teacher in the entire district.[5] For the most part, students

[5]A hijabi is a Muslim woman or girl who wears the head covering called a hijab.

in this district had only interacted with people who looked like her through a screen, and much of the media coverage at the time focused on criminalizing Arabs and Muslims. She knew this student was voicing a perception shared by many of his peers and their families. Luckily, her classroom desks were always arranged in a circle for this very purpose. As she sat down with the students, she said, "Let us talk about where these ideas may have come from." They had an amazing critical conversation that lasted for two days and resulted in a collective class understanding: We fear what we don't know or understand. At the culmination of the two days, she invited the students to "ask me what you want to know about me. Ask me anything." She answered their questions and encouraged them to go home and share their conversation with their parents. Two days later, the boy's father called her to apologize.

When Sawsan shares that story with fellow teachers, she often hears remarks like, "That student should have been written up!" or "That would have been straight to the Dean's office if it were me." However, she chose to put her ego aside in that moment to enable a much more powerful learning experience to occur for all of her students. That series of conversations transformed the culture of the class and changed the hearts and minds of many parents who had probably never met someone who looked like her before. At the end of the year, the students in that school voted her Teacher of the Year. She became their role model, even though she looked nothing like them.

Ego is such a potent toxin, and we need regular practices to curb its influence. Part of Sawsan's discipline as an educator—which she also promotes with teachers in her work as a coach, administrator, and consultant—is the importance of gathering student feedback on our practices, Street Data! How do we invite students to become our partners in the classroom if we are not constantly soliciting their feedback and asking them what they want and need? (This is the essence of the Street Data framework featured in Chapter 2, which undergirds a Pedagogy of Voice.) Opening ourselves to feedback can be scary and even hurt sometimes. However, Sawsan has learned to sit with and reflect on the negative feedback she receives with even more seriousness than the positive. She has learned to take the time she needs to metabolize it so she can get to the other side and respond to what learners need. If being the recipient of such feedback makes you anxious, think about

how it feels for young people to *give* us feedback. It takes a lot for children and adolescents to tell their teachers they can do better. When we set aside our egos, we create space for students to actively participate in all facets of the class and become fellow stewards of the learning environment. At the end of the day, we must remember that we are educators for one purpose: to serve the students. This humbling reminder keeps Sawsan grounded in the message that "I am here for you and only you. Your feedback is the most important feedback I'll ever receive."

Closing Reflections

Here is an acknowledgment as we close this chapter: We *all* have trace elements of these toxins in our practice. No one is exempt from the effects of colonialist and white supremacist thinking in education, but each of us has the capacity to notice and challenge those effects. This chapter is not a treatise on purism or an attempt to separate the "good teachers" from the "bad"—that would be slipping into the very binary, deficit thinking we want to curtail! Instead, we invite you to engage in a reflective process of examining your practice and interrogating the ways in which we all have perpetuated harm, even when we didn't intend to. This takes courage and emotional stamina as we commit to decolonizing our pedagogy.

To model the **iterative** process of teaching, let's return to this chapter's opening vignettes as Marlo and Sawsan share their reflections on what they learned.

Marlo's reflections: I look back at my charter school experience with painful awareness of how I embodied *binary thinking* and *power over* as I fell into the trap of complying with the norms of an oppressive culture. Students don't need to be policed at every turn; they should be guided by their educators to develop agency and mine their untapped brilliance. Nowadays, I'm driven to constantly explore the ways in which these toxins live in me and my practice.

Sawsan's reflections: When I reflect on my decision to hold a whole-class discussion after the murder of George Floyd, I understand the harmful consequences of the *power over* and *teacher-as-expert* toxins. I meant well, sure, but my intentions did not negate the harmful impact I caused. From this experience, I have learned to create more space for

students to journal and process their feelings about injustice *individually* before engaging in class conversations. The Street Data I collect this way helps me gauge where students are at emotionally and then decide whether to begin class in affinity spaces or a whole-group dialogue.

As we transition to Chapter 4, we invite you to acknowledge an uncomfortable truth: Education systems are built to reward teachers who toe the line of a pedagogy of compliance by prioritizing quiet classrooms, rewarding obedient students, and celebrating high scores on culturally biased, "inch-deep" standardized tests. If we are courageous enough to acknowledge what it means to teach inside an oppressive system, we can begin to enact subversive micro moves every single day. We can begin to truly prioritize children's needs and individual learner profiles over the demands of the system. This begins with embracing 10 Ways of Being that flow from a place of radical love, exactly where we are headed next.

Awakenings: Crystal's Corner

As you read through the 10 Toxins, did you notice any defensive, physical or somatic response? If so, which of the 10 Toxins prompted that response? How did that feel in your body? What narratives surfaced in its wake?

Take a moment to reflect on how the toxins show up in your teaching practices and how they might affect your students. In your journey to eliminate these toxins, is there one that you want to start with?

When thinking about your diverse learners, are there specific toxins that feel more salient for you? How might you approach those?

Centering the Margins: To what extent did you experience these toxins as a child in school? In what ways might the toxins affect children who have been historically marginalized and oppressed compared with those who have not?

NOTES

Storientation: Student Voices

Voice to me is the ability to speak freely in a safe space. Oftentimes, classrooms can be constraining. So having the ability to engage our voices and tune into our identities and express ourselves within classroom spaces is really important.

—Melania, Sawsan's former student

NOTES