

Embracing gentle resistance to the slow violence of traditional English curriculum

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore and highlight how a secondary English teacher’s commitment to nonviolence was maintained through gentle and purposeful resistance to the subtle violence of her school’s curriculum practices.

Design/methodology/approach – Data from this qualitative study was examined with attention to the slow violence of schooling and critical literacy practices.

Findings – The participant resisted the curriculum in place by making changes to text order and focus, omitting texts strategically and carefully attending to language and power relationships.

Originality/value – Slow violence is only beginning to be taken up as a concept in education research. In addition to connecting canonized literature and traditional curriculum with this building conversation, this study presents “gentle resistance” as a similarly dispersed way for teachers to contribute to the goals of nonviolence.

Keywords Teaching literature, English teaching, Curriculum English, Critical literacy, Literary canon, Slow violence

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As we continue to broaden conceptualizations of violence and how it manifests in school spaces, we also can broaden understandings of what resistance to violence includes, creating more avenues by which teachers might include nonviolence in their practices. Literacy teaching has long been recognized as a site of possibility for nurturing nonviolence and restoration (O’Reilly, 1984; Winn, 2013), through and alongside pedagogy and curriculum choices (Bruce and Davis, 2000; McKenzie and Bender, 2021; Sealey-Ruiz, 2016). English teachers are “in a unique position to interrupt violence, pedagogical injustices, and misrepresentations” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2016, p. 294) and have the linguistic skills required to “create a more just, inclusive, and nonviolent curriculum” (Bruce and Davis, 2000, p. 120).

This analysis highlights changes that a nonviolence-focused educator made to the shared secondary English curriculum she was expected to maintain, in principle. After shifting her perspective to account for some of the subtler violences of US-based schooling, and those of



the school where she worked specifically, she recognized aspects of her teaching were contributing to that violence. However, a curriculum overhaul was not possible and various socio-professional layers of school culture made outspoken resistance feel out of reach. The findings show how, through relatively small shifts in curriculum, she was still able to resist some subtle violences of schooling in and through her teaching.

In the discussion, this gentle resistance approach is brought into conversation with Higham's (2022, 2024) recent extension of the theorization of "slow violence" (Nixon, 2011) into the realm of schooling. The concept of slow violence requires a nuanced understanding of harm, an understanding that acknowledges the compounding damage done by structural and affective violences of schooling, which may be individually imperceptible. This analysis adds to these emerging understandings, suggesting that recognizing the accretive nature of slow violence in schooling can also illuminate, and nurture, broader conceptions of teacher resistance.

Indirect violence and the context of schooling

In addition to school-based violence that is personal, immediate, direct and visible, there are violences that impact students and teachers in less obvious ways. Indirect, structural violence (Galtung, 1969) can be so deeply embedded into the "normal" functioning of our institutions (including schooling) that it is rendered invisible. While some students and communities are impacted more often and more harshly than others (Molla and Gale, 2023), the structural violences of schooling can harm even those students whom they advantage (Rubin, 2024).

Intentionally or not, schools are often complicit in perpetuating indirect violence through practices of normalization and exclusion (Ball and Collet-Sabé, 2021). Everyday practices include reliance on curriculum that communicates the dominating values, norms and power relationships in a society (Apple, 2018), legitimating some forms of social life while marginalizing others (Giroux, 2021). Curriculum violence (Ighodaro and Wiggan, 2010), an example of indirect or structural violence, is produced through teaching "in a manner that ignores or compromises the intellectual and psychological well-being of learners" (Ighodaro and Wiggan, 2010, p. 2). Significantly, as Jones (2022) and others (e.g. Borsheim-Black *et al.*, 2014; McLaren, 1988) suggest, tipping the balance from teaching in ways that produce violence toward ways that avoid violence is not only (or even primarily) a question of *what* material is taught, but a question of *how* students are invited or required to engage with it.

Critical approaches and traditional curriculum

In secondary English instruction, factors contributing to curriculum violence may include reliance on inherited practices and a commitment to traditional or canonized texts (National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association, 1996) as neutralized models of literary merit and instruments for the uncritical glorification of the dominant culture (McLaren, 1988). In addition, having only these texts presented as "great literature" implies that the views and experiences of the mostly White male authors are universally representative and unimpeachable and delegitimizing other groups' contributions to culture and knowledge.

Teachers who must, or feel they must, teach canonized or other assigned texts might choose to teach them critically and responsively, using the opportunity to invite out-of-school knowledges (Kinloch *et al.*, 2017; Tierney *et al.*, 2006) and to inquire into cultural issues and power dynamics. For example, Borsheim-Black and her colleagues (2014) conceptualized critical literacy pedagogy as subjecting texts to a critical eye and offering students a chance to become more aware of texts' influences and the canon itself. A recent

review of literature (Ervin, 2022) supports the possibility of enacting culturally sustaining pedagogies from within the boundaries of prescribed texts.

In addition to using critical pedagogies to read “against” canonized texts (Borsheim-Black *et al.*, 2014; Foss, 2002; Steiss, 2020), research shows a growing practice of adding texts and stories from outside the dominant cultural narrative. Researchers have highlighted the possibility of decentering canonized texts by including diverse young adult literature alongside them through pairing (Borshiem-Black and Sarigianides, 2019; Dallacqua and Sheahan, 2020; Dyches and Thomas, 2020), restorying (Dyches, 2018), layering (Muhammad, 2020) and remixing (Banack, 2022). Significantly, these approaches specifically aim to unsettle the canon’s primacy and presumed “universalism” (Tyson, 2015). Drawing from Toni Morrison’s (1988) caution against “allowing diverse texts to exist only to support canonical texts,” Toliver and Hadley (2021) supported English education students to imagine moving their future instruction away from, rather than alongside, the Eurocentric literary canon.

Beyond decentering some texts and the limited perspectives they represent, critical approaches may offer an opportunity to critique socio-cultural constructions that have created and maintained the literary canon (Borsheim-Black *et al.*, 2014; Truman *et al.*, 2022). For example, in a discussion of *The Odyssey*, Steiss (2020) invited critique of the text as not only a product of a culture that venerates a certain kind of violent male hero but also a text that contributes to maintaining these values. Drawing from Spampinato’s (2018) essay problematizing “mainstream literary structural misogyny,” Miller and Colleagues (2023) discussed using YA literature to explicitly challenging canonized texts as a means for naming and challenging rape culture in English curricula.

Criticality alone is not necessarily enough to move toward teaching that is nonviolent (Chubbuck and Zembylas, 2011) and restorative (Winn, 2013). Ahmed (2016) argued for an “affective turn” in the field of critical literacy, supporting the development of emotional relationships with text and noticing “the range of emotional, spiritual, somatic responses readers have to text” (Amsler, 2001, p. 83). Ahmed (2016) claimed that widely used critical literacy approaches (e.g. Janks, 2010; Lewison *et al.*, 2002) offer teaching tools needed only to *begin* to interrupt violence and build awareness of human suffering. However, because of its rationalist foundation, critical literacy has been unable to attend to affective and emotional dimensions of “reading the word and the world” (Freire and Macedo, 1987).

Conceptualizing slow violence and a gentle response

In this analysis, literature about curriculum violence and teachers’ responses to it was helpful in contextualizing the participant’s expressed motivations to incorporate nonviolence and her intentions for wanting change. However, it was specifically the theorization of *slow violence* in education spaces (Higham, 2022, 2024) that offered an analytical lens through which her prioritization of nonviolence through gentle resistance came into focus as both coherent and meaningful in its incompleteness.

Slow violence has recently been engaged, most notably by Higham (2022, 2024), as a frame for understanding, and potentially responding to, indirect violence in the structures and experiences of schooling. Nixon (2011) conceptualized slow violence outside of education as a specific type of structural violence that represents ecological harm occurring “gradually and out of sight” (p. 2) creating “long emergencies” (p. 3) that disproportionately impact the most vulnerable. According to Higham (2022), the concept of slow violence also effectively encapsulates the quieter violences of schooling, as the term describes violence in a broader and more intrinsically complex way than the more general categorization of structural violence (Galtung, 1969) affords. Slow violence may include forms of structural

violence, but calls attention “to broader, more complex descriptive categories of violence enacted slowly over time” (Nixon, 2011, p. 11).

Highlighting slowness draws attention to the temporally and spatially dispersed nature of slow violence, which is not instantaneous but “incremental and accretive” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Thinking with slow violence also acknowledges people’s long and compulsory relationship with the institution of schooling, across which subtle violences might be enacted continually and “unspectacularly” (Higham, 2022, p. 8). Significantly, attending to slow violence makes space to consider schools as saturated with affectively perceived violences (Mayes *et al.*, 2020, p. 2) that might never be directly articulated, building up over time in ways that can only be understood with a longer view.

Research context and methods

During this year-long qualitative study, I spent time as a researcher in several classes taught by focal participant Kristen Phillips (a pseudonym), including the tenth-grade English class discussed here.

Context and participant

Kristen, a White woman in her early 30s, had lived in the large Southwestern US city where the study took place since attending university there as an English literature major, adding teaching certification during her final year. At the time of the study, she was in her fifth year of teaching English Language Arts. The school where Kristen taught, Magnet High School (MHS, a pseudonym), was a well-regarded public high school without many recorded incidents of direct physical violence. While Kristen recognized violence as more complex than that, she also acknowledged this as one of many privileges of her working environment. As a “magnet” academy, MHS was meant to attract high-achieving students from across the district who formally applied in a competitive process. Compared to other district schools, MHS was well-resourced, teacher turnover rates were comparably low and students who gained admission to MHS were generally highly engaged, had excellent attendance and were significantly less likely to be from families experiencing financial hardship than the district overall. Approximately 1,200 students attended MHS and the graduation rate was 100%, with 99% designated “college ready” through standardized test performance in reading and mathematics (district average was 68%). The representation of ethnicities in Kristen’s class was similar to that of MHS overall; however, these figures also differed from district-wide data. For example, district-wide, White-identified students accounted for 27% of the total population, and MHS’s student body was 56% White. District-wide, Asian-identified students accounted for 4% of the population, and at MHS, the student body was 20% Asian. Conversely, there were significantly fewer students identified as Black (1.6%) or Latine (17.5%) at MHS than district-wide percentages would suggest (7.6% and 58%, respectively).

At MHS, all tenth-grade students were enrolled in “Pre-AP” English, for which the curriculum was described as focusing on “foundational works of the Western Canon” (MHS course guide). Each grade level had a team reading list, which had been constructed well before Kristen was hired. Despite being a teacher for five years, Kristen was still regarded as “new” by many of her colleagues.

Working at MHS was considered prestigious, and Kristen’s position there was a source of both pride and insecurity. Coming from a small town several hours away, Kristen grew up in a nontraditional family that she described as “always struggling” financially, living in ways she felt were alien to her colleagues and many of her students. Regardless of what she achieved, she said her background and the current position of family members who were

always “on the verge of poverty,” contributed to a quiet but constant fear about losing the security of her job.

Data generation and analysis

Before this study began, Kristen participated in research that explored teachers’ learning about nonviolence in a professional development program (Rubin, 2020). She wanted to continue thinking about nonviolence and invited me to do research in her classroom the following school year. As a former high school English teacher, I was fluent in the general rhythms of classroom life, and as a typically-abled cisgender White woman (like the overwhelming majority of teachers in the USA), my attendance was hardly noteworthy at MHS. However, I do not underestimate my presence as an “embedded and embodied researcher” (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2016, p. 118). My positionality and experiences are inextricable from the generation and analysis of data in this study. My background as a teacher surely informed my attunement to, and curiosity about, the complexity of some finer-grained teaching decisions.

Ethical approval was obtained through my university, then through the district and school. All (30) 15–16-year-old students in the class (and a parent/guardian) consented to participate in the study, which was designed and presented as having a primary focus on Kristen’s teaching. I attended one of Kristen’s tenth-grade English classes for approximately eight months; they met for 90 min every other day. This contributed to more than 100 hours of participant observation, during which I made notes, collected documents and recorded photos and videos. Because of the patterns of her teaching day, Kristen and I often had time to talk informally, and she also provided information through two questionnaires and four semi-structured interviews (of 1–2 hours) during the study.

The collected data was initially organized by date and topic and has been re-read/watched/listened to several times since the study’s completion. Through spirals of inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019), potential themes were constructed that reflected Kristen’s approach to softening the impacts of indirect violence in her class. Alongside considerations of critical affective literacy (Ahmed, 2016), it was through a theoretical lens informed by the slow violence of schooling (Higham, 2022, 2024; Nixon, 2011) that these moments came into view as aspects of a cohesive, ongoing engagement with resistance to violence in literacy teaching. Slow violence became increasingly visible in the relief image of Kristen’s gentle resistance to it, highlighting a purposefully subtle constellation of choices.

Moving toward nonviolence in English teaching

In an interview at the start of the study, Kristen summarized the general approach to English teaching across her department as having students “read a whole-class novel, most likely written by a White male author, discuss that author in purely literary terms, write an essay about that book, and then read another whole-class book written by a White author, who’s male, and so on.” Kristen said the centrality of Advanced Placement (AP) tests as a measure of school and student success meant “there’s a huge emphasis on literary analysis. So, there is not a lot of room for students’ actual voices in their own writing, and in their own thinking.” This pattern not only reinforces the authority of certain voices through their centrality in the curriculum, it also positions the teacher as the proxy of that authority in the classroom, and constrains students’ engagement, so they use their voices only in response to those figures with more authority (Freire and Macedo, 1987).

The themes explored below show how Kristen maintained a focus on nonviolence by considering not only the components but “the arc” of her teaching, unsettling the hierarchy of classroom voices and maintaining attention to language and its affective capacities.

“Thinking of nonviolence in the arc of what we learn”

To highlight some nuances of Kristen’s choices and attend to some of her small but effective moves toward less violent English teaching, I mainly focus on one six-week teaching period. The expected topic was literature about war and a “hero’s journey” which, through text choices and discussion, fed into interdisciplinary learning about “the Vietnam Era.” As Kristen put it, in the first semester, students were “reading constantly about war, and men fighting.” This unit drew Kristen’s critique because in the core texts, violence is not only present but central and male characters are almost entirely the focus (with women positioned as objects or objectives if mentioned at all). In an interview, she said a priority was making the first semester “a lot less violent” and that even though bigger changes were not possible, she could “think about nonviolence in the arc of what we learn.” She said, “it feels small, but I hope some of these choices reflect larger thinking.”

One of the main texts for the grade-level team was *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien, a novel constructed of short stories about a platoon of US soldiers during the Vietnam War. This text was included as literature and connected to the history curriculum, intended to illustrate the time period in which it was set. Even though it has become a canonized high school text itself (Spampinato, 2018; Toliver and Hadley, 2021), to connect with more “classic” literature, the other teachers on the team usually linked it with learning about war and the “hero’s journey” by preceding it with *The Iliad* (Trojan War) and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (WWI).

Kristen acknowledged that she did not “have freedom to change major works or large assignments.” But, before the school year began, she confirmed her suspicion that although teachers had grown accustomed to assigning it, *All Quiet on the Western Front* was not technically required. She decided to quietly skip teaching it in her classes, reasoning that she was “choosing not to read another book about war and suffering” at a time of year Kristen said students were often overwhelmed to the point of not sleeping to keep up with the workload.

She accepted that *The Things They Carried* (TTTC) was part of the present curriculum and noted that, in addition to the interdisciplinary connections students were expected to make, other teachers often declared how much they “loved” the book and loved teaching it. Still, omitting a whole novel had cleared space for Kristen to make adjustments in scope and focus for this text. “I don’t get to really choose what we read. But I have gotten to choose the order that we read things in, which makes it a lot better.” So, rather than starting immediately with a unit on war and heroes (starting with *The Iliad* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*), she reconceptualized the six-week period as focused on how writers (including student writers) use writing to make sense of – and speak back to – their worlds. While planning, Kristen said, “I don’t really know the connection to the *Iliad* yet, it’s also about war, obviously, but also about telling stories, orating stories, the relationship to the audience, the listener. I still have to figure that part out. Or maybe I don’t right now.” (It ended up being taught at the end of the school year, in excerpts, to fit the time remaining).

Kristen began with a focus on writing, which included students building a writing practice and developing their written voices (Bomer, 2010). Alongside starting their own writing notebooks, students read *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott. In addition to directing the initial class topic class toward the students’ own voices as writers, this shift provided a way to reposition the class’s engagement with the subsequent text, TTTC. Toward the end of the first month of school, Kristen introduced it to the class, saying, “We have spent the last few weeks thinking about being writers. The author of *The Things They Carried* was also occupied with identity and the never-ending process of being a writer [...]” They started reading TTTC at the same time as other English classes as, in addition to the book as literature, students’ learning about the historical and political context lined up with the planned interdisciplinary

connections about this period of American history. Failing to maintain alignment with the other English classes would have been noticeable and potentially stressful for Kristen's students while in their history classes.

As this unit continued, Kristen said she was feeling some tension around keeping much of the content the same and still trying to "think about nonviolence at the heart of the unit." While she could not omit anything else, she added some poems by Vietnamese authors, further supporting the idea that every story has many perspectives and creating space for additional voices. This addition also provided important opportunities to talk directly about violence, humanity and peace. The students read some poems related to the war, such as "A Piece of Sky Without Bombs" by Lam Thi My Da, in which she addresses a person who attracted attention to herself to divert bombs from a convoy, and "A Vietnamese Bidding Farewell to the Remains of an American" by Tran Thi My Nhung. When introducing "Alabaster Stork" by Tran Dang Khoa, Kristen shared that the poet, as a child, would recite poems to soldiers as they rested before heading into battle. Poems that sparked long conversations were "Nonattachment" by Nguyn Ba Chung and "Please Call Me By My True Names" by Thich Nhat Hanh, whose work she emphasized as being related to her own learning about peace and nonviolence.

Changing the timing and volume of voices

Because of the shift in focus and content changes mentioned above, Kristen's students began the semester by learning about notebook-keeping and creative writing. This led to them producing a piece of writing that was not based on a work of literature or positioned as a response to someone else's ideas, but based on their own lives, perspectives and choices. It was also an opportunity for Kristen to learn "about students' real lives" and establish relationships based on an "appreciation for what knowledge [students] already bring." Arranging to begin the school year this way positioned students as arriving with worthwhile things to write about, and Kristen as a person who was willing to learn with and about them. In reshaping the curriculum, Kristen purposefully developed a power dynamic different from that established by more teacher-centered approaches. During an interview, she worried that MHS students were positioned, often, "as vessels to be filled by experts, teachers." She was more interested in "crafting an experience that students can use to learn from themselves, and each other, and literature, not necessarily simply directly from me."

The inclusion – and elevation – of students' voices was evident at other times as well, including framing their reading of TTTC as studying the work of a "fellow-writer" and through other adjustments to common/required assignments. When studying poetry, all tenth-grade students were required to produce an essay in which they discuss a theme and synthesize evidence from several poems. In the second semester in Kristen's class, students read poetry and wrote their own poems. As their final project, students each curated a thematic anthology of poems that could include some of their own work alongside that of published poets. These themes varied widely, for example: poems about seasons and change; poems about dissent and challenging authority; poems to reflect the vulnerability and strength of being a teenage girl; poems about nostalgia and fearing adulthood. One anthology, about the complexity and importance of family, had all poems presented in English and Japanese. The grade-level poetry essay requirements were met through the anthologies' thoughtful introductions.

Questioning the language of authority and authorship

Kristen took a small-scale change approach to many other assignments and activities, taking note of firm boundaries and spaces where she could attend to nonviolence. As the year began,

she thought about how she could contribute to that goal by being purposeful about the way she spoke with students, and how tasks, even required assignments, were worded and presented. An example of the latter was the timed, in-class essay about TTTC: another non-negotiable curriculum element. Encoded in the published description of the year-level was a focus on “grounding students in a thorough, structured essay style that will form the basis of a convincing scholarly voice for college writing” and demanding that students “learn the conventions of in-class essay writing, in preparation for the AP writing of their junior year.”

Even though Kristen accepted the requirement to teach this specific type of writing about a text she had not chosen, to use class time for students to write an essay in a high-pressure situation and to evaluate students’ writing using the AP rubric, there were still spaces for attending to her nonviolent priorities to “make these assignments both more inviting and meaningful for students.” In the inherited assignment, she said the teacher’s voice came through as one that “didn’t care about students, that threatened them.” To start, she changed the list of cautions from frightening and personal (“to pass, you must”) toward being focused on the quality of the essay and not conflated with the writer (“successful essays will” have/show). She explained, “even if I am not changing what the assignment is asking, the way I frame it shows how I see the students, how I see their work, and how I see myself in relation to those things.” The essay questions for students to choose from were also revised to better reflect the angle of focus on TTTC in her class, including a choice about how the constructs of masculinity and/or femininity were developed in the text.

While she was not sure what she could do about it, Kristen was troubled by the neutralized presentation of the “convincing scholarly voice” students were expected to use. “They are supposed to write in this “proper,” privileged voice,” rather than their own. Kristen said. “It’s like this old, White male voice you have to use, and nobody says that, but the examples show it.” This was not a discussion she raised with students, but it contributed to her ongoing thinking about teachers’ language, which was not adequately acknowledged as a powerful and co-constitutive element of students’ realities and an important tool for gentle resistance to presumed power structures and the violence they reinscribe.

Discussion: noticing violence and responding gently

Kristen was committed to strengthening nonviolence in her teaching, but also wanted to remain employed at her school and wanted to maintain professional relationships that were generally polite and productive. There are many reasons a teacher might want to appear to be in compliance with the status quo of their institution while also quietly working to reduce harm by unsettling some of the power structures that maintain it (Dyches *et al.*, 2020). Large-scale changes felt “impossible,” but so did abandoning her commitment to make her teaching less violent. Kristen’s response was gentle resistance, which (like slow violence) is “unspectacularly” (Higham, 2022) enacted; with potential repercussions that are “incremental and accretive” (Nixon, 2011). However, gentle resistance is also intentional. Each gentle act of resistance was purposeful and intended to be incomplete on its own and always unfinished, with the hope that over time, the residue of these actions might cohere into something sturdy.

Through this analysis, the co-existence of gentle resistance and slow violence became visible: acts of gentle resistance revealed the subtle contours of slow violence while pushing against it and vice versa. This resonates with Butler’s (2015) idea that conceptualizing nonviolence becomes possible by recognizing our ongoing relationality with violence, and “the task is to think of being acted on and acting as simultaneous, and not only as a sequence” (Butler, 2015, p. 6). In this section, Kristen’s choices are discussed as reflecting dimensions shared by gentle resistance and slow violence. They are composed of acts/events that are

individually subtle and may not even be noticed, but can accumulate gradually across students' long and affectively complex conscription in school spaces.

Purposefully small actions over time

Kristen wanted to use her position to reduce potential harm, but wanted to do so in a way that, while it might cause tension, would not set her in blatant opposition to her colleagues or jeopardize her job security. However, approaching nonviolent change gently and maintaining certain texts and activities was also an important acknowledgement of students' own complicated relationships with schooling. It is possible that an outright rejection of all common canonized curriculum would have alienated rather than engaged many of her students. Many students at MHS prioritized scoring high on AP tests and competing for rankings in the school and nationally; they expected to be supported to climb to the top of the structures in place, not party to destabilizing them. Any shifts toward nonviolence could not compromise the perception of academic rigor. There was also continued conversation among students about different teachers' classes, and if Kristen's students felt they were not being as suitably prepared as their peers, this could have produced harm by creating unnecessary anxiety.

In terms of disrupting traditional curriculum, it was quite significant to omit *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a canonized text that had traditionally been read and that other teachers continued reading. She also moved the reading of *The Iliad* from its usual privileged place at the beginning of the year to later and later, with much less time allocated for it. When taken-for-granted canonized texts are re-positioned as omissible (Toliver and Hadley, 2021), their contribution to violence and the volume of curriculum time-space they take up becomes optional rather than expected and space expands for changing text order, time and focus.

Subtle messages about whose voices belong, whose bodies matter

It would have been difficult to remove or replace *The Things They Carried*, which, in addition to being required, was a pronounced favorite of another 10th-grade teacher. Teachers' uncritical attachments to texts and practices are often left unexamined when they serve to support the status quo, and this would have been a very difficult book to omit or replace. But assigning a text is not a neutral act – TTTC, specifically, was a text Spampinato (2018) named as part of a literary canon that valorizes misogyny and hinges on plot points around male sexual frustration. In a national context where 56% of girls in grades 7–12 have experienced sexual harassment (Hill and Kearl, 2011), the uncritical normalization of sexual violence in and through literature is problematic. Living with misogyny is not hypothetical for students, and its circulation in classroom discourses impacts them in ways they may not immediately recognize. In the introduction to her poetry anthology about being a teenage girl, the student author wrote about being in seventh grade and having boys both insult her body and try to access it, and how last year, she kept leaving school a little early to avoid someone who'd been following her home. Now (in tenth grade), she did not feel comfortable being alone with any boy or man, "not even teachers." While Kristen's class read TTTC critically, more attention is needed to the slow violence of requiring students to be in environments where male voices and desires are kept at the center, including male teachers' attachments to violent texts.

The addition of poems by Vietnamese poets alongside a text focused on Americans' experiences in the Vietnam War pushed against the objectification and dehumanization of Asian characters, which Kristen said was not seen as an issue by her colleagues, despite 20% of MHS students reporting Asian heritage. Ahmed (2016) highlights the significance of activating literacy teaching as an avenue for recognizing and responding to the suffering of

others, in texts and in the world. By reframing the way their lives were presented to students, their suffering was also reframed, rendering their “lives livable and their loss as grievable” (Ahmed, 2016, p. 394, drawing from Butler, 2010). These poets presented, in their own voices, their humanity and their capacity for art and beauty. In this case, it was also a way to integrate literature specifically about nonviolence and living nonviolently.

The spatially and temporally dispersed nature of slow violence requires us to consider not just isolated events but “incremental processes that inhibit our powers to act over time and how this gradual, and often invisible violence, constrains us” (Higham, 2024, p. 891). Kristen’s recognition of the “scholarly voice” that students were required to use in academic essays as being non-neutral was similarly significant. Her naming this “academic style” as not neutral but gendered (male), raced (White) and classed (privileged) matters and echoed Ball and Collet-Sabé’s (2021) description of the “normative human” against whom students are universally judged. This was not something Kristen raised with students, but articulating this issue foreshadowed more profound excavations of ideas about curriculum and instructional forces whose impact was likely subtle and accretive. Which students’ written voices are more likely to already be in close alignment with idealized examples? And which students are quietly being told, again and again, that they must alter their voices significantly to succeed or gain access to privileged spaces? What pieces of students’ complex selves are perhaps not excluded directly, but carved away a little at a time?

Embracing imperfection and starting now

In an interview, Kristen said, “my first year, I didn’t know who I was as a teacher. So, my priority was to do a ‘good job,’ get my gold stars, make sure people were happy with me.” After five years of teaching and growing confidence, the significance of external validation had waned. As an experienced teacher, with ethical priorities more complex than “doing a good job,” Kristen was better able to tolerate necessary uncertainties and imperfections, facilitating small – and meaningful – changes toward nonviolence. Teachers making gentle changes toward harmony with nonviolent beliefs is a shift that cannot be driven by a desire for individualized recognition and cannot be undermined by a desire for completeness and perfection: gentle resistance is intended to be dispersed across time and space, meaning each individual action is inherently imperfect and incomplete.

Implications and conclusion

This study reinforces Higham’s (2024) call to expand the use of slow violence as a framework for considering and researching the long and dispersed experiences and impacts of schooling [1]. For Kristen to better align her beliefs about nonviolence and her teaching, she first had to notice some of the ways that unquestioned traditions and practices camouflaged slow violence, a step other nonviolence-minded educators might take as well. English teachers who see the need to change their practices to better incorporate nonviolence may have limited capacities for pushing back. By embracing gentle resistance, they still might begin immediately, through approaches like removing canonized but non-required texts, reordering texts/activities, shifting pedagogical focus, reallocating curriculum time, using ancillary texts purposefully and being thoughtful about students’ voices and classroom language and discourses.

Although the work of resisting violence through teaching will always be unfinished, we must make sure it does not remain unstarted. As its strongest implication, this study supports the hopeful possibility that highlighting slow violence and a teacher’s meaningful, gentle resistance to it might serve as an open invitation, lowering the threshold for teachers’ participation in the broader nonviolence project. Gentle resistance to violence is not about

any teacher's individual achievements or immediate outcomes; it is about contributing to the dispersed residual impact of subtle nonviolence across space and time. While this gentle approach is unlikely to produce seismic shifts in students' schooling experiences, we know the creep of glaciers reshapes landscapes.

Note

1. It is worth reiterating that students and teachers are continually subjected to and in relation with a multitude of violences; in the USA, this includes life-threatening violence ([World Population Review, 2024](#)), and the psychological toll of living with, and preparing for, the possibility of life-threatening violence ([El Sherief et al., 2021](#)). Calling attention to slow violence, and other indirect forms of violence, is not intended to ignore or distract from the urgent need for drastic, policy-level responses to more visible violence.

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