

LACEY ROBINSON

AND THE **UnboundEd** Community

JUSTICE SEEKERS

**PURSUING
EQUITY**

IN THE DETAILS OF
**TEACHING &
LEARNING**



UnboundEd

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Praise for Justice Seekers

“In true form, Lacey relentlessly confronts a sensitive topic with compassion and grace. With great intention, she presents the historical backdrop of enslavement, education, and institutional racism, skillfully weaving these themes into the present day context. Drawing from her personal journey as both a black woman and an educator, she gently leads the reader to explore the complexities of implicit and explicit bias. Her tone is neither accusatory or judgmental, rather she displays vulnerability with her own admissions of bias. Through her words, Lacey wraps her arms around us as she invites us to join her in defending the educational rights for everyone.”

—**Susan Lambert**, host of *Science of Reading: The Podcast*

“As a Black female former superintendent, I recognize the systemic failures of our American school system that disproportionately impact Black and brown children. Justice starts with challenging all educators to see the ways in which we can contribute to eradicating racial inequity. By identifying and eliminating shame-inducing pedagogies, policies and procedures, and improving the quality of our teaching, we can provide an equitable education for all children. I applaud Lacey Robinson for her willingness to share her own lessons learned as an invitation for the rest of us along this journey of ‘Seeking Justice.’”

—**Kaya Henderson**, CEO, Reconstruction.us

“For those who want to advance equity for students of color and those living in poverty, *Justice Seekers* provides inspiration and actionable steps. Written with passion and authenticity, this book will change lives. She personalizes the journey and humanizes the work.”

—**Dr. Ana F. Ponce**, Executive Director, GPSN

Justice Seekers

**Pursuing Equity in the Details
of Teaching and Learning**

Lacey Robinson

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INTRODUCTION

It was 301 days after the announcement of the pandemic—an event that seemed to unleash a cyclone of social, political, racial, and humanitarian crises across the world—and I was sitting at the kitchen counter working on my laptop, the TV news rolling in the background. On the morning of January 6, 2021, like me, many educators were logging onto their laptops. Others, in districts or states where policies mandated that they must enter their school buildings and offices despite the uncertain safety conditions they were braving as new COVID-19 variants emerged, teachers were wiping down desks and spraying disinfectant. Many were oblivious to what was unfolding, not just in our country’s capital, but in state capitals around the nation.

I sat at my makeshift counter workspace that day astounded by the insurrection. I wished I was seeing some epic scene in a historical action movie, but it was real life, a democracy unraveling before our eyes on social media posts, TVs, and radio announcements. Honestly, those January 6th scenes felt like a breaking open, a dramatic and sudden exposure of so many of the ills that our country had been hiding for decades, even centuries before. Months and years of civic and racial unrest lingered in the air. The sound of George Floyd calling for his mother as well as the marches for Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Breonna Taylor, and countless others were top of mind. Like many of us, I watched as the insurrectionists broke past police lines and pushed democracy to the edge of

an abyss. As an educator, my mind went right to our students and what they were witnessing. What messages were being affirmed or discounted about our nation as they watched armed men, women, young and old attempt to overthrow a national election? Who was being triggered by the violence and rage? What level of safety did our students feel witnessing civil unrest at such a large scale?

I began to think about a conversation I had overheard at the grocery store weeks before. A young man and his mother were checking out ahead of me. He was examining a magazine with a headline highlighting the dangers of global warming and enticing the reader to look within to find out what they could do to help.

As he put the magazine back he quipped to his mother, “We won’t even be around in the next 50 years. Why does this matter?” I remembered feeling the sting of hopelessness and an educator’s urge to jump into the conversation and encourage him to analyze what he had just said. As I stood in that checkout line, the feeling of his despair blanketed me.

As I watched the insurrection unfold on January 6th, I wondered what he—and all the students like him showing up to their Zoom and in-person classrooms—felt as they witnessed this moment in history. If January 6, 2021, shined an undeniable spotlight on the cracks and fissures in our entire society, I wondered what role education could play in mending those gaps.

While the most acute pressure from the education system’s structural instability can be felt at the classroom level, we needed a framework to help educators address just how deeply and widely these injustices had spread. When I first became a public school teacher in 1996, I learned pretty early on that those in positions of power, both within and outside the school system, were making decisions that, at best, affected their quarterly assessments and, at worst, affected the minute-to-minute, day-to-day actions and planning of educators in school buildings. Even when I held positions at the district level later

in my career, my skills were leveraged into what was deemed pertinent for the newest endeavor, not into addressing the systemic inequities I'd witnessed for years and at every level.

It was at the system level—sitting in meetings where leaders were making decisions regarding materials, products, programs, and hiring practices that would play a role in either supporting our students' careers and college trajectories or hindering them—where I finally began to see the machine behind the cloak of the public school system. I quickly understood that the decisions being made were not always grounded in the research and evaluation cycle. Instead, decisions were birthed from political views, relationships, and, of course, funding. I was disappointed to realize how little system leaders utilized the research and development that were necessary to eradicate harmful conditions for students who experienced the greatest disenfranchisement through food, housing, and economic insecurities.

Justice is found in the details of teaching and learning[®] was born out of those experiences and the experiences of the many educators at UnboundEd who wanted to take a different approach to transforming education for Black, brown, and Indigenous children. Years ago at UnboundEd—an national nonprofit I've led since 2019, after 23 years as an educator—we began a journey to address how those fissures showed up in the work of education. In frank conversations, we released our own shame about complicity in upholding the system as it is, and we read the research about how to combat the systemic inequities that had both benefited and harmed us. Through this process we began to see a path forward. At the center of that path is an understanding that moments like January 6, 2021, happen when we refuse to fully wrestle with our sordid past as a nation as it relates to racism and to our failed systems. Most importantly, we have not as a nation faced the ways these failures influence our thinking and understanding of the world around us.

We live in a time in our society in which information cycles at a pace few people could have anticipated decades ago. Partly because it's so hard to sift through all of that information, I believe we have retrained ourselves to trust the word that is shuffled among us, online and in conversation, rather than the word that lives on paper, as a result of review and verification. Even as more information streams into our lives, most people will leave high school having learned to read only moderately. Moderate readers may at times find themselves relying more on the word that was passed to them rather than on what they could read. So, at a time when critical analysis and thought are more crucial than ever, we have a crisis of functional illiteracy in our country. According to a 2020 Gallup analysis, 54% of adults lack proficiency in literacy.¹ Few times in my adult life have I felt that crisis more acutely than in the moments leading up to and away from that January 6th morning. And as much as the harrowing moments that have shaped our past few years have been about political and societal systems, they have also been American education's failure to produce a truly literate society, one that embraces robust critical thought and creates equitable outcomes for every one of its citizens.

Of course, education doesn't stand alone. We know that only when food, housing, medical care, and economic stability, just to name a few, are secured for all children, is the pump primed to deliver just and equitable schooling. Throughout this book, I will be talking about how *justice is found in the details of teaching and learning*[®], while also acknowledging that when all of our societal systems, like the ones referenced above, take an accurate accounting of the racial harm embedded in our national foundation, our efforts at equity can better flourish.

But we don't have time to wait for one or all of these things to be fixed before fixing education. We hope that by attending to the justice in the details of teaching and learning, we can make our sector a model for the other sectors that desperately need transformation.

Justice seekers—people seeking that societal transformation—are not only working to shift their own mindset around what is possible in the world we have. They are also naming injustice and identifying its tangible features so that they can be eliminated and eradicated. We see this happening in the housing sector, as banks begin to acknowledge the financial disparities in communities of color versus white communities and commit to creating products and programs that ignite property ownership opportunities. In education, the acknowledgment of the massive opportunity gap not only has sparked discussion, but has commissioned many federal and state agencies to investigate, gather stakeholders, and create pathways for academic equity.

Justice requires reconciliation, and the path to reconciliation in education requires us to use our skills and identities to acknowledge, name, and unravel the institutional practices that have relegated Black, brown, and Indigenous students to second-class citizenship. Right now, shame about what our nation has done to its most vulnerable peoples has sparked the current wave of book banning and repressive school legislation. Shame tells us to deny harm rather than wrestle with our culpability in it in order to devise a remedy. When we fall victim to shame, we remain at that same level of immobility and reactionary thinking, and never press forward with empathy. Researcher and author Brené Brown often asks us to lean into empathy, connecting to what a person may be feeling without having the same experience, in order to extinguish shame. As humans we are connected within the same ecosystem, and what affects one has an effect on all. As you read this book, I invite you to release the shame that has hampered our progress toward justice for centuries.

Unfortunately, I can't promise you a fix-it manual or a "just tell me how to do it" guide to revolutionizing education. Like you, I am on my own path in figuring all of this out amid national events that are more and more troubling, especially when children and educators

are caught in the figurative and literal crossfire of political divides. My own story informs and challenges this work, as yours informs and challenges yours. In some sense, telling my story, examining the highs and lows, and the successes as well as the failures of my professional evolution, has freed me. It has allowed me to take a closer look at myself and the systems I serve. This kind of self- and system analysis are essential when seeking root causes of inequalities and homing in on our spheres of influence.

At best, this book is a journey through the life of one educator who has been both the recipient and conductor of injustices in education and who has grown exponentially in her own equity journey. This book amplifies the lessons I have learned along the way as well as the frameworks those learnings have helped cultivate at UnboundEd. You'll see how I arrived at an understanding of the essential importance of grade-level, engaging, affirming, and meaningful instruction and how that knowledge shapes so many aspects of my work today. My hope is that the book sparks conversations, reconciliation, and hope for future generations of educators and students. My deepest wish is that together we can put the knowledge that *justice is found in the details of teaching and learning*[®] at the center of our instruction and pedagogy.

1 Educational Inequity: How We Got Here

Years ago, I was sitting in the back of a first-grade classroom, pen and paper at the ready to capture everything I could while observing a teacher in the launch of her new reading block.

I looked around the classroom at the students settling in, and I quickly observed that about one in four children in the class were students of color. With a flick of the teacher's hand, the students began to assemble on the carpet, each one with a whiteboard and a marker. I could tell right away that they were very familiar with this particular routine.

The teacher began the reading block with a read-aloud of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. Immediately, when she showed the front cover of the book, a boy with deep brown eyes and black hair called out, "Teacher, teacher, that's a *con dê!* That's a con dê!"

"It is?" the teacher inquired. "Is that how you say 'goat' in Vietnamese?"

"Yes," the same student responded. "My um, um, *bà ngoài* has lots of them!" he announced.

The teacher, not wanting to miss the teachable moment, inquired, “Oh, your bà ngoại . . . Thanh, do you want to tell the rest of our friends what a bà ngoại is?”

He smiled at the chance to teach the class and announced proudly, “That means um, um grandma!”

The teacher started the read-aloud, and I noticed that all the students were leaning in, anticipating the story. When the teacher got to the book’s repetitive chorus, “Trip-trap, trip-trap went Billy Goat’s hooves as he walked across the bridge,” another student—this time a little boy with what looked to be a fresh-cut afro mohawk and a wide smile that showed one tooth missing—proudly repeated the chorus aloud with the teacher. She turned and admonished him with a look. When the teacher got to the chorus again, right in unison with her, the boy chimed in.

This time, the teacher stopped reading and said his name sharply, “Mitchell,” and then gave him the signal to be quiet. Mitchell immediately shrugged his shoulders, and his silly grin faded into a pout as his chin dropped down to his chest. He deflated a little bit, sinking into the floor and picking at the carpet to avoid eye contact.

At that moment, for reasons that were not immediately apparent to me, I was drawn to Mitchell. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t seen that kind of interaction before in my 15 or so years as an educator. Likely, I had even been the initiator of a similar disciplinary exchange. But it was the glimpse of how quickly and palpably Mitchell’s demeanor changed, how clearly diminished he became, that caught my attention. I saw in that moment how his light was instantly turned off, and I saw an all-too-familiar feeling that I now can articulate as shame settling in. The shrugging of his shoulders and then the self-soothing behavior of picking at the carpet spurred up an angst in me that, if I was being honest, I hadn’t felt since I was in grade school.

I made a note in my journal to circle back with the teacher to discuss the relationship she had with Mitchell and to see if she had noticed the shift in his demeanor following her correction. I was acutely aware that Mitchell's teacher had misinterpreted his outburst as unruliness, rather than as the exercise of a deeply cultural Black practice of choral reading. While she took time to celebrate the cultural and linguistic differences of Thanh, her actions toward Mitchell, just a moment later, had signaled both to him and to the other children that his cultural practices, and by this I mean Black cultural practices, had no place in her lessons.

I glanced at the other students to gauge their reactions to the teacher's reprimand. Had her harshness with Mitchell impacted their own desire to speak up in class? Even in that moment, as I analyzed Mitchell and his classmates, I struggled with an internal argument, to push away what I observed as classroom behavior management, or to lean into the uncomfortable gut feeling of incremental marginalization that laid beneath the teacher's action.

I decided to stay for the entire school day and shadow Mitchell from afar. Several times during the reading block activities, I noticed that Mitchell and his Black and brown classmates who had assembled after the read-aloud in a corner of the classroom, were scolded by the teacher to "watch their noise level," or questioned about whether they were "on track." These were all seemingly normal interactions between a teacher and students, but for me, in this moment, it had moved beyond the standard classroom procedure into a two-way mirror. I was observing Mitchell's adverse reactions to the teacher's constant reprimanding, while simultaneously being reminded of dominant cultural rules of interaction and how they played out, not only in this classroom, but in classrooms across the country. In reprimanding Mitchell during the read-aloud, this teacher had further solidified the disconnect between the cultural language patterns that many students in her classroom were familiar with and "proper" classroom language. Mitchell's cultural language

could have been utilized to further all of their learning. What I know now is that this teacher was oblivious to the fact that seemingly minor classroom management actions were conveying a message about whose culture was worthy of being included in instructional practices.

I flashed back to my memories of second grade and that feeling of wanting to sink into the classroom floor, when the teacher had either ignored me or reprimanded me about a rule that I had forgotten or had not even been aware of. I connected to the feeling of shame that I could sense Mitchell was having, that same feeling that had been conveyed to me over and over again as a student maneuvering through classrooms in which I was one of very few students of color, sometimes the only one. In my own education, I had grown accustomed to the persistent shadow of a feeling that I was treated differently because of the color of my skin. When I was young, I simply identified it as “Teacher don’t like me.” As I grew older, I knew which white teachers tolerated me, which ones despised me, and which ones would physically slink back if I walked up to them. I wondered if I was witnessing the birth of that same shadow in Mitchell.

The expression on Mitchell’s face signaled an all-too-familiar surge of humiliation. As a child, encountering a world in which at any moment you are made to feel ashamed or to endure constant reminders that you are discounted, can inflict calluses of sadness that often turn into anger and defiance, or worse, isolation and defeatism. I was also reminded of how those moments led me to my current path: to resolve the explicit and implicit barriers that bias and racism build in our students, ourselves, and the systems in which we serve.

This moment of Mitchell shrinking into himself would resonate even more deeply later in my career, when I read the stats on Black students’ disproportionate achievement or the school disciplinary crisis facing Black and brown students.

From Moment to Movement

I had originally been sent to Mitchell's classroom by the suburban school district office where I worked as an early-childhood specialist. In 2005, we wanted to begin preparation for our annual summer professional development (PD) series for elementary teachers. My assignment was to observe a sample of the school's reading blocks, get a sense of how teachers were implementing readers' and writers' workshops, and report back on what possible professional development topics would be pertinent to ensure that the reading blocks were being implemented with fidelity. The district was struggling with an ever-increasing proficiency gap in reading scores, even after overhauling the former expectations of English Language Arts (ELA) instruction and adopting new schedules, curriculum, and support practices.

However, Mitchell's reaction to the teacher that day pushed me into a much broader observation about the small and insidious ways our education system is encoded with deep bias against Black children and other students of color. And when I say "small," I do not mean inconsequential. In fact, it is these ostensibly small interactions, in the details of teaching and learning, that make the biggest difference in the way Black and brown students perceive themselves, how teachers see them, what is expected of them, and their own agency and worth in education and their world beyond.

There are many things one could surmise about what was driving the interactions between Mitchell and his teacher. At first, the exchange seemed to be predicated on discipline; as a teacher early in my career, I would have very quickly validated why there seemed to be such a focus on correcting his behavior. However, having witnessed the patterns of overemphasis on behavioral correction for students of color in various systems, I had a grounded belief as to why Mitchell's teacher was "keeping an eye" on him.

According to research, the overzealous disciplining of Black and brown children in schools plays a significant role in the pathway to low achievement, lack of foundational skills in reading and math, and—the most distressing outcome—incarceration. Black students account for just 15% of all public school students, but they represent about 39% of students suspended from school—an overrepresentation of 23%.¹ In 2014, preschoolers were included in the Civil Rights Data Collection on school discipline, and Black children were found to account for 18% of preschool enrollees and nearly half (48%) of all preschoolers suspended. This disparity contrasted discouragingly with white students, who made up 43% of the preschool population but only 26% of those subject to suspension.² When students experience just one standard deviation of a higher suspension rate, their likelihood of being arrested or incarcerated increases by 15% to 20%.³ The problem of over-disciplining Black children like Mitchell is systemic, and it begins with the smaller interactions I witnessed in this teacher's classroom. However, it also occurred to me that she probably had never considered how her actions fit into larger patterns of over-disciplining Black and brown children.

I was then, and am now, deeply aware of the systematic disenfranchisement that Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other students of color face in most educational settings, the pressing messages they receive, both implicitly and explicitly, about the value of their non-dominant cultural social norms and communication styles. This awareness is one of the foundational reasons why I went into education in the first place. My hope was, if nothing else, to serve as a small beacon of light to the students of color I encountered on their educational walks. In my eyes, Mitchell's innate, and honestly adorable, urge to respond chorally to the line of repetition the teacher was reading aloud was not distracting or worthy of disciplinary attention.

This was the same reaction I was having in my own head, but I knew enough about social dominant norms not to say it aloud.

After all, choral reading—or call and response—is a part of so many Black cultural spaces I’ve inhabited in my life. It’s a part of church, community rituals, memorials for loved ones, and even movie watching. Augusta Mann explores this important cultural language pattern in her “Touching the Spirit” framework.⁴ Touching the Spirit highlights for educators a research-based teaching modality focused on supporting students from the Black and African American cultural background. Mann’s work suggests that when we meaningfully incorporate children’s cultural practices, we enrich and deepen classroom learning. She is far from alone in these assertions: educational research and recognition of choral response and the devaluation of cultural linguistic differences has existed for decades, along with culturally responsive teaching research from Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings in the 1990s.⁵

However, like many educators, Mitchell’s teacher may not have thought that she could be carrying the legacy of America’s educational history in her ideologies about Black students, and about Mitchell in particular. She did not consider that not only does good pedagogy need to be grade-level-appropriate, but that it also has to be engaging, it must affirm children’s identities, and it must be meaningful to them. Simply put, this lack of consideration is the outcome of unconscious bias or implicit bias.

Unconscious or implicit bias is the set of automatic and unconscious stereotypes that drive people to behave and make decisions in certain ways. It is the mind’s way of making uncontrolled and automatic associations between two concepts very quickly. Much has been said in recent years about implicit bias and its impacts on all aspects of our society, but the most important thing to remember about bias is this: If it is left unchecked, one’s lexicon of prejudgments will continue to deepen and drive harmful behavior. We are all bombarded daily with messages from our upbringings, media, and, dare I say, skewed or incomplete understandings of history. Many of these images