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Lean on Me: Finding Voice, Honoring Difference, and Standing on Business

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Introduction

As educators, we spend a lot of time encouraging and telling students to find their voices. We ask them to speak up, ask questions, and advocate for themselves. Truthfully, finding your voice is not always easy, and it can be harder when you feel like you have to hide the pieces of yourself you love most to fit in with people whose opinions aren't needed or wanted anyway.

Participating in Roderick Ferguson's seminar, *The Kids Are Not the Threat*, challenged me in ways I did not expect. Long after each seminar ended, I found myself thinking about the same questions. Who gets to be different without paying a price? Who decides whose stories matter? Whose voices are heard, and whose are ignored? Those questions became the foundation of this curriculum unit.

Growing up in Hearne, Texas, and now teaching in the same community has shaped the way I see my students. Every year, I watch young people walk through the halls of Hearne High School carrying responsibilities that most people never see. Some help care for younger siblings. Others work after school or translate for their families while trying to keep up with school. Their stories are different, but many carry the same questions. Do I belong? Does my voice matter? Will anyone listen? Those questions influenced every part of this unit.

The title, *Lean on Me: Finding Voice, Honoring Difference, and Standing on Business*, reflects the journey I hope my students take.

When I think about *Lean on Me*, I think about community. I think about people who show up for one another when life gets hard. I think about accountability, encouragement, and relationships that remind us we are not meant to carry life's burdens alone. I also think about Joe Clark from *Lean on Me*. He was loud, unapologetic, and demanding because he believed his students were capable of more. His methods were often debated, but his commitment to young people was never questioned. Whether my students know the Bill Withers song, the movie, or neither, the message is the same. None of us make it through life alone. As we often say, "We all we got, but we all we need."

Finding Voice helps students understand that their experiences, cultures, languages, and stories matter. Every

day I teach students who move between languages, cultures, and expectations without realizing how much strength that requires. They bring more than backpacks into my classroom. They bring responsibilities, experiences, and perspectives that deserve to be heard.

Honoring Difference asks students to move beyond simply tolerating others. It challenges them to recognize that different cultures, identities, languages, and lived experiences strengthen communities. Rod Ferguson's seminar pushed me to think differently about whose knowledge is valued and whose stories are often pushed aside. That realization challenged me to create a classroom where students not only see themselves reflected in the curriculum but also learn from experiences different from their own.

Then there is the part my students immediately recognize: Standing on Business. They use the phrase all the time, but in this classroom it means something deeper. It means your actions match your words. It means speaking up when it would be easier to stay silent and standing beside people who are too often overlooked. Throughout this unit, students will see how ordinary young people transformed their voices into action that changed schools, communities, and even the nation.

Using literature, historical documents, speeches, music, documentaries, photography, and reflective writing, students will explore how literacy can become a tool for leadership and change. I hope that they leave this unit with more than historical knowledge. I hope they recognize that they do not have to wait until adulthood to make a difference. Their voices matter now. If they leave believing they belong, that their stories have value, and that they can make a positive impact in their community, then they will understand one of the most important lessons I took away from Rod Ferguson's seminar: the kids are not the threat. They are part of the solution.

Rationale

In my classroom, students know "wassup" long before they know the academic language of civic engagement, activism, cultural resistance, or democratic participation. They already understand what it feels like to be judged, excluded, or treated differently because of who they are. They know when something is unfair, even if they cannot always explain why. My job is to give them the language to describe those experiences and the confidence to believe their voices deserve to be heard.

As an ESL teacher at Hearne High School, I work with students whose lives are anything but simple. They come in carrying more than just a backpack. Many move between languages, cultures, and expectations every day. Some translate for their parents before they ever set foot in school. Others help care for younger siblings, work after school, or shoulder responsibilities that would challenge many adults. By the time they reach my classroom, many have spent years wondering where they fit and whether they truly belong.

Rod Ferguson's seminar challenged me to look at young people differently. Too often, schools focus on what students lack instead of recognizing what they already bring to the classroom. We notice test scores before talent and discipline referrals before leadership. My students remind me every day that those measures tell only part of the story. They ask difficult questions, recognize injustice when they see it, and care deeply about fairness, even if they are still developing the language to express those ideas.

One conversation from the seminar has stayed with me. Rod talked about teaching both at Yale and inside a

prison. He shared that he sometimes receives more engagement from his incarcerated students than from his Yale students and joked that now and then he wishes for a good old-fashioned “Amen” from the back of his Yale classroom. We had a good lil “kiki” (laugh), but his point stayed with me. The building does not determine genuine learning, the institution's reputation, or who is sitting in the seats. It grows out of relationships, trust, and a classroom where people feel comfortable enough to engage honestly.

His comments also made me reflect on my own journey. Some days, I miss teaching first grade because that's where I taught children to read. Watching a child decode a word for the first time and seeing that moment when everything clicks is something you never forget. Today I teach high school students. Instead of teaching many of them how to read, I teach them how to question what they read, think critically, write with confidence, and trust that their ideas matter. Both experiences have taught me that literacy is about much more than words on a page. It is about understanding yourself and the world around you.

The seminar also made me think differently about representation. I had my first Black teacher in first grade, so seeing a Black woman leading a classroom always felt normal to me. During our discussions, I learned that some people did not have a Black teacher until sixth grade, college, or ever. Those conversations reminded me that representation matters because it quietly tells students who belongs in positions of knowledge and leadership. At the same time, representation alone is not enough. Students deserve classrooms where they are respected, challenged, and encouraged to grow.

This curriculum grows from those reflections. Students will examine youth activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the present through the voices of Ella Baker, Martin Luther King Jr., Bob Moses, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, Cathy J. Cohen, Robin D. G. Kelley, Jamie Margolin, and Roderick Ferguson. More importantly, they will consider their own place in that story.

I want my classroom to be a place where students know they belong. I want them to understand that literacy is more than reading and writing. It is asking questions, listening with intention, telling your own story, and standing up for someone else when it matters. If students leave this unit believing their voice has value, their story deserves to be told, and they can already make a difference in their family, school, and community. The unit will have accomplished what I hoped. This unit will have accomplished exactly what I hoped. To me, that is what it means to lean on one another, honor difference, and stand on business.

Background and School Context

Hearne High School is located in Hearne, Texas, a small rural town known as the Crossroads of Texas because it sits between Houston, Dallas, Austin, and Waco. For me, though, Hearne is more than a dot on the map. It is home. I grew up here, attended school here, and now have the privilege of teaching in the same community that helped shape me. That perspective shapes how I see my students. They are not just names on a roster. They are young people whose families, neighborhoods, and experiences are deeply connected to my own.

Our student body reflects the diversity of our community. About half of our students are Hispanic, and a little more than forty percent are African American. Many are Emergent Bilinguals who move between languages and cultures every day. Before they are old enough to drive, many translate for parents, help younger siblings with homework, or take on responsibilities well beyond what most people expect from teenagers. Those

experiences build resilience, adaptability, and problem-solving, even if schools do not always recognize them as strengths.

Like many rural communities, Hearne also faces economic challenges. More than ninety percent of our students are identified as economically disadvantaged. Some work after school, while others help care for younger brothers and sisters until their parents get home. Those realities shape their lives, but they do not define their potential. Every day I see determination, creativity, humor, compassion, and perseverance that no data report can fully capture.

As an ESL teacher and dyslexia interventionist, I work with students whose educational journeys have often been difficult. Some are learning English while mastering grade-level content. Others have spent years believing they are poor readers or writers because school has been a struggle. Too often, students measure their worth by test scores instead of recognizing the strengths they already possess. I want my classroom to be a place where they begin to see themselves differently.

Rod's seminar reminded me that schools do far more than teach academic content. They shape how young people understand themselves and their place in the world. Schools can encourage students to fit into existing systems simply, or they can challenge them to ask questions, think critically, and imagine new possibilities. As we studied Freedom Schools, Black Studies, youth organizing, and student activism, one message kept recurring. Education can change lives when students see themselves as participants, not spectators.

That lesson feels especially important in Hearne. When I ask students to name leaders, they usually think of famous people. They rarely recognize the leadership they demonstrate every day. I see it when they help classmates, translate for family members, encourage friends, or keep showing up despite circumstances that would discourage many adults. Leadership is already present. Sometimes students simply need someone to help them recognize it.

Teaching in the community where I grew up has also deepened my appreciation for representation. During the seminar, several participants shared that they did not have a Black teacher until middle school, college, or never. I had my first Black teacher in first grade, and I now realize what a gift that was. Students deserve to see themselves reflected in the people who teach them and in the stories they study. They also deserve opportunities to learn from voices different from their own.

For many of my Emergent Bilingual students, the themes of this unit are personal. Questions of identity, belonging, language, and acceptance are part of their everyday lives. Through literature, history, music, documentaries, primary sources, and writing, they will explore those experiences while recognizing that being multilingual and multicultural is an asset, not a limitation.

More than anything, I want my students to leave this unit with a stronger sense of who they are. History matters, but so does seeing yourself in it. If they leave believing they belong, knowing their voice has value, and recognizing that they already have something meaningful to contribute to their families, their school, and their community, then this unit will have accomplished exactly what I hoped.

Objectives

This curriculum unit asks students to look beyond names, dates, and historical events to examine how ordinary young people have challenged injustice, strengthened their communities, and created meaningful change. As they explore literacy, identity, belonging, and civic responsibility, students will strengthen their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and critical thinking skills while considering what it means to participate in their schools, communities, and democracy.

The questions that guide this unit do not have easy answers. They are meant to spark conversations, challenge assumptions, and encourage students to reflect on their own experiences and those of others.

Essential Questions

Why do people sometimes feel pressure to hide parts of themselves to fit in?

Who gets to be different safely, and why?

Why do people stay silent when they witness injustice?

How can young people use their voices to create positive change?

What responsibilities come with having a voice?

How can literacy become a tool for leadership, advocacy, and community building?

To explore these questions, students will study both historical and contemporary examples of youth activism. They will read speeches, essays, memoirs, primary source documents, oral histories, poetry, and selected excerpts from books while also analyzing music, photographs, artwork, and documentary film. Along the way, they will encounter the voices of Ella Baker, Martin Luther King Jr., Bob Moses, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, Roderick Ferguson, Cathy J. Cohen, Robin D. G. Kelley, Jamie Margolin, and many others whose work demonstrates the power of education, organizing, and civic engagement.

As students engage with these texts, they will practice close reading, collaborative discussion, reflective writing, research, and multimedia analysis. They will learn to distinguish fact from opinion, recognize bias, evaluate evidence, and consider multiple perspectives before concluding. Just as importantly, they will learn to support their own thinking with evidence while listening respectfully to ideas that may differ from their own. Because many of my students are Emergent Bilinguals, I intentionally embed opportunities to strengthen listening, speaking, reading, and writing throughout the unit. Students will work collaboratively, participate in structured academic conversations, and write for a variety of purposes while building the vocabulary and confidence needed to communicate their ideas effectively.

Students will also examine how music, storytelling, photography, documentaries, and oral histories preserve culture, challenge dominant narratives, and keep overlooked voices alive. Inspired by Toni Morrison’s idea of “researching the bit,” they will investigate whose stories are missing from traditional narratives, consider why

those voices matter, and reflect on how their own experiences contribute to a richer understanding of history and community.

Building relationships is just as important as building academic skills. At the beginning of the unit, students will create a classroom Social Contract through our Capturing Kids' Hearts process. Together we will identify the values and nonnegotiables that will guide our learning community. Rather than simply following rules, students will help establish shared expectations rooted in respect, empathy, accountability, and responsibility. Because our classroom community will continue to grow throughout the unit, the Social Contract will remain a living document that students can revisit, reflect upon, and amend as needed.

Students will also analyze historical and contemporary issues using Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats.

The unit concludes with a civic action project that allows students to apply everything they have learned. Each student will identify an issue affecting the school or community and develop a meaningful response in a format of their choice. Some may write letters to community leaders, while others may create public service announcements, advocacy campaigns, or multimedia presentations. Whatever format they choose, students will be expected to support their ideas with evidence, communicate respectfully, and propose thoughtful, realistic solutions.

More than anything, I want this unit to help students see literacy differently. Reading and writing are certainly part of literacy, but they are not the whole story. Literacy is learning to ask questions, listen carefully, evaluate information, tell your own story, and advocate for yourself and others. It is recognizing that your experiences matter and that your voice has the power to influence the world around you.

I cannot promise that every student who leaves my classroom will become an activist, a politician, or a community organizer. Some will become welders, nurses, teachers, mechanics, military personnel, business owners, parents, or choose careers they have not yet imagined. What I do hope is that every student leaves believing their voice matters. I hope they understand that leadership is not about having a title. It is about having the courage to do what is right, standing beside people who are too often overlooked, and using your gifts to make your family, your school, and your community better than you found them.

If my students leave believing they have a voice worth hearing, a story worth telling, and a responsibility to use both in service of something greater than themselves, then this curriculum will have accomplished exactly what I hoped it would. Whether they lead a movement, mentor a younger student, serve their community, or simply choose kindness when it would have been easier to look away, I hope they understand that meaningful change rarely begins with famous people. More often, it begins with ordinary people who decide to lean on one another, honor difference, and stand on business.

Content

This unit centers on a simple truth that came up throughout the seminar: young people have never been content to sit on the sidelines of history. They have organized, written, protested, taught, and created new ways of understanding the world around them. Still, their contributions are often minimized or left out altogether.

My students often assume there is only one correct version of history because textbooks and teachers usually present it that way. This unit asks them to look beyond a single account, examine different perspectives, question assumptions, study evidence, and pay attention to who had the power to record history. I want them to think about how quickly people pull out their phones to record events today and compare police footage with a bystander's video. One account may leave out details or twist what happened to protect people in power. Toni Morrison's idea of "researching the bit" encourages students to study what is missing as carefully as what is present. A missing story does not mean a person or community had nothing worth saying. It may mean that no one in power thought the story was worth saving. This process will help students develop critical thinking skills and guide their engagement with history and activism.

I am drawing directly from Rod's pedagogical approach by using Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats throughout the unit. This strategy will help students slow down, examine an issue from multiple angles, and listen before deciding what they believe. They will use the hats while reading speeches and documents, watching film clips and documentaries, discussing ideas, analyzing music, and making connections across texts. Incorporating the Six Thinking Hats will strengthen students' critical analysis and deepen their understanding of complex issues in social justice and history.

Students will examine the relationship between education and power. Freedom Schools gave Black children opportunities to study their history, question inequality, and see themselves as full participants in democracy. Later demands for Black Studies programs raised the same issue in colleges and universities. The question remains: Who decides what knowledge belongs in schools, colleges, universities, and prisons? Who decides which histories are worth studying? Recognizing how institutions determine the curriculum will help students understand the role of power in shaping education and knowledge.

Rod's work will help students understand that schools and universities are not neutral spaces. Institutions decide what is taught, who is welcomed, and which differences are supported, ignored, or violated. Rod says, "As a text that sees issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and indigeneity as signs of our intellectual advancement, this book opposes those that argue that attention to these modes of difference has compromised academic excellence or radical politics."[1]

White Hat: Information and Facts

The White Hat asks students to begin with what they know. They will identify facts, examine evidence, determine what information is missing, separate fact from opinion, and question the reliability of sources.

Students will use the White Hat to examine youth activism during the Civil Rights Movement, including student sit-ins, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Freedom Schools, and the Birmingham Children's March. These examples show that young people were not waiting for adults to do all the work. They organized, marched, and took serious risks because they believed change was possible.

Ella Baker's work will challenge the idea that leadership belongs to one famous person standing in front of a crowd. Her approach focused on developing ordinary people and helping communities recognize the strength they already had. Using the White Hat, students will study what the historical record tells us about these movements while asking whose contributions have been ignored or minimized. The Six Thinking Hats article contends that, "Someone who does not like an idea will not make any effort to find points in favor of the idea–and the other way around. The hat method separates ego from performance. The thinker is challenged to use the different hats and actually experiences a sense of freedom because the thinker is no longer limited to one position."[2]

Red Hat: Feelings and Lived Experience

The Red Hat gives students room to acknowledge emotion. Facts matter, but people do not organize, protest, or challenge injustice without emotion. Anger, fear, hope, grief, and frustration often move people to act. Recognizing these feelings can inspire students to connect deeply with social issues and feel empowered to participate.

Students will consider what it may have felt like to attend a school where their history was ignored, join a march knowing they might be arrested, or speak up while being treated as if they were too young to understand. They will also connect these ideas to their own experiences with language, identity, belonging, and acceptance.

Angela Davis helps students see that struggles for justice are connected. Racism, sexism, poverty, war, and economic inequality do not stay in separate boxes. They overlap and shape people's daily lives. Davis says, "In recent years, some Black people have indicated that they are tired of demonstrating and that mass street marches are passe'."[3] Students will also examine Greta Thunberg's frustration in her climate speeches and discuss how emotion can strengthen an argument when it is connected to evidence and action.

Black Hat: Caution and Critical Thinking

The Black Hat asks students to look for concerns, weaknesses, bias, and possible harm. This is not about being negative. It is about learning not to accept a claim simply because it sounds confident or comes from someone in authority.

Students will use the Black Hat to examine Strom Thurmond's proposed Academic Freedom Act, The Diversity Myth, debates about AP African American Studies, and current arguments about banned books. They will ask who is labeled dangerous, disruptive, or militant; who supposedly needs protection; and who has the power to apply those labels. Strom argues, "Creative thinking cannot take place in an atmosphere of dissent and negativism, or in situations where violence is threatened or occurring."[4]

Questions may include:

Who benefits from this argument?

Who is left out?

What evidence supports the claim?

What assumptions are being made?

Whose safety is being prioritized?

The Black Hat will also help students see how schools and universities are places of power. Rod Ferguson's work helped me understand that educational institutions decide which subjects are valued, which histories belong in the curriculum, and which kinds of difference are accepted. This approach can help students realize their ability to critically analyze and influence these decisions, fostering a sense of agency and leadership.

Yellow Hat: Possibilities and Hope

The Yellow Hat asks students to recognize what is working and what could be possible. Many people in this unit faced serious obstacles but still believed change could happen. Freedom Schools allowed Black students to study their history, question inequality, and imagine themselves as full participants in democracy. Black Studies programs showed what could happen when students refused to accept a curriculum that left them out. Ella Baker believed leadership could be developed in ordinary people, while Greta Thunberg showed how one student's decision to speak could grow into a worldwide movement.[5]

Jamie Margolin's Youth to Power gives young people practical ways to think about advocacy and organizing. Cathy J. Cohen also challenges the idea that Black youth are politically disconnected by recognizing how they participate through protest, art, digital spaces, and community work. Cohen states, "While I strongly believe that the nation's commitment to the progress of black youth is a moral obligation, others may be convinced of our responsibility by understanding that by ignoring the basic needs of far too many black youth, we have created a crisis not only for these young people but also for our nation."[6]

Students will use the Yellow Hat to consider how literacy, education, and community organizing create opportunities for people who are often told they have little power.

Green Hat: Creativity and New Ideas

The Green Hat asks students to imagine new possibilities. Activism does not happen only through marches and speeches. It can also happen through writing, storytelling, music, art, journalism, and new learning spaces.

Inspired by Toni Morrison, students will conduct their own "researching the bit" investigations. They may uncover an overlooked story from local history, interview a family member, or research someone whose contribution was left out of a textbook. They will also consider how oral histories preserve voices that official records may miss.

Music and poetry will be treated as important archives. Students will study how Sweet Honey in the Rock and other artists use music to preserve memory, affirm identity, and strengthen community. They may create a "Lean on Me Playlist" or design a soundscape around belonging, difference, joy, struggle, or resilience. Each student will explain how the songs connect to the unit's larger themes.

Students may also create podcasts, public service announcements, spoken-word pieces, Freedom School lessons, or advocacy campaigns. The Green Hat gives them a chance to use what they have learned and imagine what they might do with it.

Blue Hat: Reflection and Next Steps

The Blue Hat helps students organize their thinking and decide what comes next. After using the other hats, they will step back and consider how their thinking has changed. They will identify the most convincing evidence, the questions that remain, and any action that may be needed.

Students will return regularly to the Social Contract created through our Capturing Kids' Hearts process. Because it is a living document, the class can revisit and revise it as students learn more about empathy, accountability, belonging, and shared responsibility. They may decide to add a new nonnegotiable or clarify an

existing one.

The Blue Hat also connects to the unit's focus on information and access. Kim Snyder's The Librarians, the American Library Association's "Freedom to Read Statement," and materials on investigative journalism will help students consider who controls information. They will examine what happens when books are removed, difficult stories are avoided, or journalists and libraries are pressured not to share certain ideas. What resonates most is, "The freedom to read is of little consequence when the reader cannot obtain matter fit for that reader's purpose. What is needed is not only the absence of restraint, but the positive provision of opportunity for the people to read the best that has been thought and said."[7]

Disability justice will broaden the conversation about access. Students will examine how buildings, policies, and expectations often create barriers rather than an individual's body or mind. They will consider neurodiversity and discuss what it means to build a classroom where different ways of learning, communicating, and participating are taken seriously.

The Six Thinking Hats are not meant to tell students what to believe. They give students a structure for thinking before reacting. That matters when topics feel personal, uncomfortable, or unfamiliar. The hats also give my Emergent Bilingual students clear language for entering a difficult conversation without feeling as if they must know everything before they speak.

By the end of the unit, students should understand that literacy is not only about reading words correctly. It also means asking questions, checking sources, noticing who has been left out, listening to people whose experiences differ from their own, and deciding what to do with what they have learned. Meaningful change is rarely the work of one famous leader. It grows from ordinary people who build relationships, share their stories, organize their communities, and create opportunities for others to lead. That is the kind of leadership I hope my students begin to recognize in themselves.

Teaching Strategies

Students learn best when they feel seen, heard, and valued. Before meaningful learning can take place, relationships must be established and trust built. Throughout this unit, I use instructional strategies that encourage students to think critically, collaborate, communicate their ideas, and recognize the value of their voices. These strategies also provide multiple entry points for my Emergent Bilingual students by supporting language development while encouraging higher-order thinking.

Building Community Through a Social Contract

One of the first things my students do each school year is create a Social Contract as part of our Capturing Kids' Hearts framework. Instead of beginning the year with a list of classroom rules, we begin by talking about relationships. We discuss how we want to be treated, how we want others to treat us, and what kind of classroom community we want to build together. Students generate the expectations, and because they own

them, they are more likely to hold themselves and one another accountable throughout the year.

As I participated in Rod Ferguson's seminar, I realized this process closely mirrors the work of many of the movements we studied. Organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Freedom Schools, and the Young Lords did not simply gather people together. They established shared values, collective responsibilities, and common goals that guided how members worked together. Their movements were successful because they understood that community does not happen by accident. It must be built intentionally.

This curriculum extends our classroom Social Contract by asking students to identify a set of nonnegotiables that will guide our work together throughout the unit. Rather than focusing only on classroom behavior, students will consider the values that create spaces where everyone feels safe enough to learn, ask questions, disagree respectfully, and share their voices.

Students begin by discussing questions such as:

What helps people feel like they belong?

What makes it safe to share your ideas?

How should we treat someone whose opinion is different from ours?

What responsibilities do we have to one another?

What kind of classroom do we want to build together?

From those conversations, students develop a list of classroom nonnegotiables. While every class creates its own agreement, many of the same ideas usually emerge.

Our nonnegotiables might include:

We listen to understand before we respond.

We disagree with ideas, not people.

We respect every language, culture, and lived experience.

We encourage one another instead of tearing each other down.

We ask questions without fear of embarrassment.

We allow everyone to be heard.

We support our thinking with evidence.

We own our words and our actions.

We speak up when something is unfair.

We leave people better than we found them.

Unlike a set of classroom rules posted on the wall and forgotten, our Social Contract is a living document. As our classroom community grows and new situations arise, students have opportunities to revisit, reflect on, and amend it when necessary. If we discover that an expectation is missing or that our community needs something different to continue growing, we discuss those changes together and revise our agreement. This process teaches students that strong communities are built through reflection, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Just as the movements we study evolved to meet new challenges, our classroom community continues to grow throughout the year.

Inquiry-Based Learning

Throughout this unit, students learn by asking questions instead of simply looking for answers. Rather than memorizing historical facts, they investigate why events happened, whose voices were included and whose were left out, and how those events continue to influence society today. Questions such as *Who gets to be different safely?Why do people remain silent when they witness injustice?*, and *How can young people create positive change?* guide our discussions, reading, and writing.

Rod's seminar reinforced the importance of inquiry. Whether we examined Freedom Schools, Black Studies, Toni Morrison's concept of "researching the bit," or contemporary debates about curriculum, we were constantly encouraged to question what we thought we knew and to look beyond a single narrative. I want my students to develop that same curiosity. I want them to become investigators instead of passive learners.

Six Thinking Hats

One strategy used throughout this unit is Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats. This strategy encourages students to examine an issue from multiple perspectives before forming conclusions. It helps students slow down their thinking, consider viewpoints different from their own, and support their ideas with evidence.

Students will use each thinking hat as they analyze speeches, historical documents, photographs, documentaries, songs, and current events.

The White Hat focuses on information and facts. Students identify what they know, what evidence is available, and what additional information they still need.

The Red Hat focuses on feelings and emotions. Students consider emotional reactions, empathy, and how different people may have experienced the same event.

The Black Hat focuses on caution and challenges. Students identify risks, weaknesses, bias, or unintended consequences.

The Yellow Hat focuses on benefits and possibilities. Students examine strengths, positive outcomes, and opportunities for growth or change.

The Green Hat focuses on creativity. Students generate new ideas, propose solutions, imagine alternatives, and think beyond traditional responses.

The Blue Hat focuses on reflection and organization. Students summarize their thinking, evaluate what they have learned, and determine next steps.

Throughout the seminar, I found this strategy especially helpful because it challenged me to pause before making assumptions and reminded me that understanding history requires examining multiple perspectives. I want my students to develop that same habit of thoughtful inquiry.

Reflective Writing and Collaborative Discussion

Writing is the thread that connects every lesson in this unit. Students will keep journals, respond to essential questions, analyze primary sources, and write argumentative, narrative, and reflective pieces throughout the unit. Inspired by *Freedom Writers*, Toni Morrison, and the voices we encountered throughout the seminar, students will use writing to explore their identities and connect with others' experiences.

Students will also participate in Think-Pair-Share activities, collaborative discussions, and small-group conversations before writing independently. Many of my Emergent Bilingual students are willing to share their thinking with a partner before speaking in front of the entire class. These discussions help students build confidence, practice academic language, and learn to disagree while respectfully supporting their ideas with evidence.

The goal is not simply to produce essays. The goal is to help students understand that literacy is a form of leadership. Reading helps us understand the world. Writing helps us change it. By the end of the unit, students will apply these skills through a civic action project in which they identify an issue affecting their school or community and propose a meaningful response. Whether they choose to write a letter, create a podcast, design a presentation, or develop an advocacy campaign, students will leave understanding that literacy is much more than reading and writing. Literacy gives them the power to participate in their communities, advocate for others, and use their voices to make a difference.

Classroom Activities

Activity One: Same Event, Different Story

Students will begin by examining two accounts of the same event from the Civil Rights Movement. The sources may include a newspaper article, textbook passage, photograph, speech, official statement, or firsthand account from a young person who participated. Before we begin, I will connect the lesson to something students understand. When an incident happens at school, the student involved, the administrator handling it, and the person who recorded it may tell three different stories. They may all be talking about the same event, but that does not mean each version is complete.

Working in small groups, students will identify what the sources agree on, where they differ, whose voice receives the most attention, and what may have been left out. They will use the White Hat to gather facts, the Red Hat to consider people's feelings and experiences, and the Black Hat to look for bias, missing information, and possible harm.

Each group will decide which account offers a fuller picture and support its choice with evidence, prompting students to critically reflect on who holds power in shaping history and how different voices influence collective memory.

My Emergent Bilingual students may discuss sources in English or Spanish, and activities will be adapted with sentence stems, vocabulary support, and partner conversations to ensure inclusivity and cultural responsiveness, helping all students participate meaningfully.

Activity Two: Researching the Bit

This activity grows out of Toni Morrison's idea of "researching the bit." Students will pay attention to people and stories that have been pushed aside, briefly mentioned, or left out of traditional history lessons.

Students will choose a person, event, organization, or community story that deserves more attention, encouraging them to value diverse perspectives and feel motivated to amplify overlooked voices.

Each student will develop a research question and gather information from at least three sources. When possible, one source should be a primary source. Students may also interview a family member, educator, former student, church member, community leader, or longtime Hearne resident. Before conducting an interview, students will prepare respectful questions and receive permission to record the conversation or take notes.

Students will present their findings as a short article, podcast, visual timeline, digital story, or graphic narrative, developing critical thinking skills and a deeper understanding of how different voices shape history and responsible citizenship.

This activity allows my students to see that Black and Hispanic history is not limited to a chapter in a textbook or a designated month. Their families and communities have histories worth preserving. A story does not become unimportant because someone in power failed to write it down.

Activity Three: The Soundtrack of Belonging

Music is already part of how my students make sense of life. It gives them words for joy, struggle, anger, love, grief, pride, and hope. This activity asks students to treat music as a text and as a record of culture, identity, and community.

We will begin by listening to and analyzing a teacher-selected song such as Bill Withers's "Lean on Me." Students will examine the lyrics, speaker, audience, tone, message, and cultural context. We will discuss what the song says about community and what responsibilities come with asking others to lean on us. We will also examine how a song's meaning may change depending on the listener's experiences.

Students will then curate a playlist of five songs connected to one of the unit's central themes: finding voice, honoring difference, belonging, collective care, resistance, joy, or standing on business. Their playlists may include gospel, blues, R&B, hip-hop, soul, country, Tejano, conjunto, corridos, reggaetón, Latin pop, or another

genre that reflects their families, cultures, and experiences. Students may choose songs in English, Spanish, or both languages.

For each selection, students will identify the title and artist, explain the song's central message, select a meaningful lyric, and connect that lyric to a text, person, event, or idea from the unit. When a song is in Spanish, students will provide an English translation or explanation of the selected lyric.

The order of the songs must be intentional. The playlist should tell a story instead of sounding like five unrelated songs thrown together. A student might begin with exclusion, move through struggle and self-discovery, and end with community, action, or hope.

Students may present their playlists as annotated lists, slideshows, digital album covers, podcasts, or visual displays. Use clean versions of songs when available. A song containing mature language may be considered only with teacher approval and when the student can explain its academic purpose.

The final reflection will answer three questions: What story does my playlist tell? Whose voice does it center? What do I want someone to understand or feel after hearing the final song?

Activity Four: Build a Freedom School for Hearne

Students will study how Freedom Schools gave Black children opportunities to learn their history, question inequality, and see themselves as participants in democracy. We will discuss why Black communities had to create these learning spaces and what students could study there that their regular schools refused to teach.

Working in pairs or small groups, students will design a fifteen-minute Freedom School lesson for students at Hearne High School. Their lesson must teach something they believe Black and Hispanic students need to know but may not find in a traditional textbook.

Possible topics include local Black history, Mexican American history in Texas, the value of bilingualism, Black family photographs, student activism, disability access, music as an archive, banned books, the history of a Hearne neighborhood, or the contributions of an overlooked person or group. Students may also suggest a topic that connects to their family or culture.

Each lesson must include a learning objective, a short reading or visual source, two discussion questions, one student task, and an exit ticket. Groups will teach their mini-lessons to the class. After each lesson, classmates will provide feedback on what they learned and what they would like to know more about.

We will close by discussing who usually decides what belongs in the curriculum. Students will consider whether they should have a voice in those decisions and what knowledge they believe schools have a responsibility to teach. This activity moves students from receiving information to creating and sharing knowledge.

Activity Five: Standing on Business Civic Action Project

The final activity asks students to apply what they have learned to an issue affecting Hearne High School or the larger Hearne community. Students will choose an issue that matters to them, but the project cannot stop with complaining. They must learn about the issue, listen to affected people, gather reliable evidence, and propose something that could actually work.

Possible topics may include language access for Spanish-speaking families, student attendance, bullying, school climate, mental health resources, support for student activities, communication between students and adults, access for students with disabilities, or the preservation of local history. All topics must be approved before students begin their research.

Students will use the Six Thinking Hats to develop their projects. The White Hat will help them gather facts. The Red Hat will help them consider how people are affected. The Black Hat will help them recognize risks and weaknesses. The Yellow Hat will focus on benefits and possibilities. The Green Hat will help them create solutions. The Blue Hat will guide their final decisions and next steps.

Students may write a letter to a school or community leader, record a podcast, create a public service announcement, develop an advocacy campaign, design an informational presentation, or propose another format. Every project must identify the issue, explain who is affected, provide evidence, propose a realistic solution, and include a section titled “What We Will Do.”

That final section matters. If students ask others to act, they must also explain what they are willing to contribute. Their plan may include educating classmates, volunteering, creating informational materials, speaking at a meeting, conducting a survey, or helping organize a school or community event.

Students will present their projects to the class or, when appropriate, to an audience that can respond. Their final reflection will answer the question: How did I use literacy to move from having an opinion to taking responsible action?

This project brings the entire unit together. Finding your voice matters, but so does knowing what you are talking about. Honoring difference matters, but it must show up in how we treat people. Standing on business means being ready to match our words with informed, responsible action.

Annotated Bibliography

Bechdel, Alison. *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008.

Bechdel uses comics to follow a group of lesbian friends as they deal with relationships, family, careers, politics, and life in their community. The combination of dialogue, facial expressions, setting, and humor gives readers more than the words alone could provide. I selected this book because it shows my students how graphic narratives can give visibility to people whose lives are often missing from traditional classroom texts. It also gives us a way to discuss identity, acceptance, and the need to create spaces where people do not have to hide parts of themselves to belong. Students can study selected panels to see how Bechdel uses ordinary moments to address serious social and political issues.

Ferguson, Roderick A. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Ferguson examines the ways race, gender, sexuality, and class overlap in the lives of Black people. He questions theories that treat Black culture as if there is only one acceptable way to live, speak, build a family, or exist in the world. His discussion of writers such as James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, Audre

Lorde, and Richard Wright adds depth to my study of Black identity and difference. This source helps me address the labels placed on students when they do not fit someone else's idea of what is normal. At Hearne High School, I teach students with different cultures, languages, personalities, and life experiences. Ferguson's work reminds me that those differences should be recognized as strengths rather than treated as problems that need to be corrected.

Ferguson, Roderick A. *One-Dimensional Queer*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019.

In this book, Ferguson explains that queer liberation has always been connected to struggles involving race, gender, class, incarceration, colonialism, and economic inequality. He argues that mainstream culture often reduces queer identity to one issue and leaves out the people whose experiences are more complicated. This idea connects to my belief that students should be seen as whole people. A student is never just a test score, language level, race, gender, or label in a school file. This source gives me a stronger foundation for teaching students to recognize how different parts of identity work together. It also supports conversations about standing with people whose experiences may not look like our own.

Ferguson, Roderick A. *We Demand: The University and Student Protests*—Oakland: University of California Press, 2017.

Ferguson studies student protest movements and the demands young people made for universities to address racism, war, unequal access to education, and the absence of their histories in the curriculum. The students in this book were not waiting for someone else to speak for them. They organized, challenged powerful institutions, and made their concerns clear. That message fits the purpose of my unit, *Lean on Me: Finding Voice, Honoring Difference, and Standing on Business*. I want my students to understand that their voices matter, but I also want them to learn that speaking up comes with preparation and responsibility. This source offers examples of young people turning frustration into organized action with a clear purpose.

Greenberg, Cheryl Lynn, ed. *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998.

Greenberg brings together the voices of more than forty members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. They reflect on voter registration, nonviolent protest, Black Power, music, women's leadership, and the disagreements that developed within the movement. Their memories show that progress did not come from one leader doing all the work. It came from ordinary people learning to trust one another, sharing responsibility, and staying committed when the work became difficult. This book gives my students a fuller picture of the Civil Rights Movement because the people who did the work can speak for themselves. It also connects to the kind of classroom community I want to build at Hearne High School, one where students support each other, speak honestly, and understand that collective action requires more than words.

Lee, Zun, and Sophie Hackett, eds. *What Matters Most: Photographs of Black Life*. New York: DelMonico Books; Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2022.

This collection contains photographs of Black family life from the 1970s through the early 2000s. The pictures capture graduations, birthdays, weddings, family gatherings, and quiet moments at home. These are not staged images created to explain Black life to outsiders. They show Black people recording their families and communities on their own terms. I chose this collection because my students deserve to see Black life represented with joy, dignity, complexity, and care. The photographs can help students study how an image preserves memory and tells a story even when no written explanation is provided. They can also use family

photographs as starting points for creating graphic narratives about their own names, histories, and communities.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

The unit aligns with the English I TEKS, which require students to use interconnected listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking skills.[8]

(b) Introduction.

(1) The English language arts and reading Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) embody the interconnected nature of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking through the seven integrated strands of developing and sustaining foundational language skills; comprehension; response; multiple genres; author's purpose and craft; composition; and inquiry and research. The strands focus on academic oracy (proficiency in oral expression and comprehension), authentic reading, and reflective writing to ensure a literate Texas. The strands are integrated and progressive, with students continuing to develop knowledge and skills with increased complexity and nuance to think critically and adapt to the ever-evolving nature of language and literacy.[9]

(2) The seven strands of the essential knowledge and skills for English language arts and reading are intended to be integrated for instructional purposes and are recursive in nature. Strands include the four domains of language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and their application to accelerate language skill acquisition. As a result, students develop high levels of social and academic language proficiency. Although some strands may require more instructional time, each strand is equally valuable, may be presented in any order, and should be integrated throughout the year. Additionally, students should engage in academic conversations, write, read, and be read to daily with opportunities for cross-curricular content and student choice.[10]

(5) Current research stresses the importance of effectively integrating second language acquisition with quality content area education to ensure that ELLs acquire social and academic language proficiency in English, learn the knowledge and skills, and reach their full academic potential. Instruction must be linguistically accommodated in accordance with the English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS) and the student's English language proficiency levels to ensure that mastery of knowledge and skills in the required curriculum is accessible. For a further understanding of second language acquisition needs, refer to the ELPS and proficiency-level descriptors adopted in Chapter 74, Subchapter A, of this title (relating to Required Curriculum).[11]

(c) Knowledge and skills.[12]

(1) Developing and sustaining foundational language skills: listening, speaking, discussion, and thinking--oral language. The student develops oral language through listening, speaking, and discussion. The student is expected to:

(A) engage in meaningful and respectful discourse by listening actively, responding appropriately, and

adjusting communication to audiences and purposes;

(C) give a presentation using informal, formal, and technical language effectively to meet the needs of audience, purpose, and occasion, employing eye contact, speaking rate such as pauses for effect, volume, enunciation, purposeful gestures, and conventions of language to communicate ideas effectively; and

(3) Developing and sustaining foundational language skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking--self-sustained reading. The student reads grade-appropriate texts independently. The student is expected to self-select text and read independently for a sustained period of time.

(5) Response skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts. The student responds to an increasingly challenging variety of sources that are read, heard, or viewed. The student is expected to:

(A) describe personal connections to a variety of sources, including self-selected texts;

(B) write responses that demonstrate understanding of texts, including comparing texts within and across genres;

Reading and Media List

Core Texts

King, Martin Luther Jr. “Youth and Social Action.”

King, Martin Luther Jr. “Conscience and the Vietnam War.”

Zinn, Howard. “The New Abolitionists.”

Zinn, Howard. “Out of the Sit-Ins.”

Baker, Ella. “The Black Woman’s Role in the Civil Rights Struggle-The Long View.”

Davis, Angela Y. “Peace is a Sister’s Issue Too.”

Theoretical and Scholarly Frameworks

Ferguson, Roderick A. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Ferguson, Roderick A. *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012

Ferguson, Roderick A. *We Demand: The University and Student Protests—Oakland*: University of California Press, 2017.

Cohen, Cathy J. *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics.* New York: Oxford

University Press, 2010.

Kirshner, Ben. *Youth Activism in an Era of Education Inequality.* New York: New York University Press, 2015.

Taft, Jessica K. *Rebel Girls: Youth Activism and Social Change Across the Americas.* New York: New York University Press, 2011.

Supplemental and Youth Voice Texts

Moses, Bob. Selection from *Radical Equations.*

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. *Freedom School Curriculum* (selections).

Young Lords Organization. "Thirteen Point Program."

Thunberg, Greta. Selection from *No One is Too Small to Make a Difference.*

Selections from *Trans Kids, Our Kids*.

Film and Documentary Clips

Freedom Writers (selected clips)

Lean on Me (selected clips)

Stand and Deliver (selected clips)

Freedom Summer (2014 documentary, selected clips)

Digital and Visual Media

"YouTube Video." http://youtu.be/5PObasStG3s

Selected LEGO-style animation clips (teacher-curated for classroom use)

Notes

[1] Roderick A. Ferguson, *We Demand: The University and Student Protests* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 5.

[2] Edward de Bono, *Six Thinking Hats* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1985), 82.

[3] Angela Y. Davis and Fania Davis, "Slaying the Dream: The Black Family and the Crisis of Capitalism," in

Women, Culture & Politics (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 72.

[4] U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws, *Proposed Academic Freedom Protective Act of 1969: Hearing on S. 1988*, 91st Cong., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), 2.

[5] Ella Baker, "Bigger Than a Hamburger," *The Southern Patriot* 18 (May 1960), https://www.crmvet.org/docs/sncc2.htm; Fridays for Future, "How Greta Started a Global Movement," accessed August 9, 2026, http://fridaysforfuture.org/what-we-do/who-we-are/.

[6] Cathy J. Cohen, *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). 10-11.

[7]*The Librarians,* directed by Kim A. Snyder (2025), 1 hr., 25 min., PBS, https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/documentaries/the-librarians/.

[8] 19 Tex. Admin. Code § 110.36 (2026), "English Language Arts and Reading, English I (One Credit), Adopted 2017," accessed August 8, 2026, https://texas-sos.appianportalsgov.com/rules-and-meetings?$locale=en_US&interface=VIEW_TAC_SUMMARY&queryAsDate=08%2F16%2F2026&recordId=196165

[9] 19 Tex. Admin. Code § 110.36.

[10] 19 Tex. Admin. Code § 110.36.

[11] 19 Tex. Admin. Code § 110.36.

[12] 19 Tex. Admin. Code § 110.36.

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