

Troublemakers

LESSONS IN FREEDOM FROM
YOUNG CHILDREN AT SCHOOL

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Preface

Canaries in the Mine

The more you refuse to hear my voice, the louder I will sing.

—Lyrics from *Something Inside So Strong* by Labi Siffre
Sung by children in Freedom Schools across the country

The pages of this book are devoted to the experiences of four young children at school. I care about the lives of children at school because I am an educator, and as an educator it is my job to insist on every child's right to a classroom experience that daily honors her, reveres her smarts, engages her curiosities, and ensures her dignity.

But I also care about the lives of children at school because I am a human being, and as a human being I recognize every child's unalienable right to be free. When I speak of a child's right to freedom, I mean that by virtue of being human she is endowed with the unassailable right *not* to have any part of her personhood assaulted or stolen. A free person can expect to be seen and treated as a full human being, free from any threats to her identity, to her cultural values and know-how, to her safety and health, and to her language and land. A free person retains her power, her right to self-determination, her opportunity to flourish, her ability to love and to be loved, and her capacity for hope.

A free person recognizes when she or others are being treated as

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PREFACE

less than fully human. And a free person embraces both her right and her duty to struggle against such treatment and to organize with others to do the same as a solidary community. This book is informed by this essential definition of every young person's right to be free, and by my belief that education is one of the primary means to realizing this freedom.

As an educator and a human being, then, I understand school to be not only a place where young people must be treated as free persons but—more important—a place where they can learn, together, how to skillfully insist on their right to be treated as free people. Classrooms must be places in which we practice freedom. They must be microcosms of the kind of authentic democracy we have yet to enact outside those walls—spaces for young people, by young people—engaging our youth to practice their power and to master the skills required by freedom.

By and large these are not the schools we have now. For the most part, schools value quiet children over loud ones and operate as though adults are the only teachers in the room. The adults get to speak while the young people listen. Questions are answered rather than asked. Our schools are designed to prepare children to take their assumed place in the social order rather than to question and challenge that order. Because we train youth in the image of capitalism instead of a vision of freedom—for lives as individual workers rather than solidary human beings—young people are taught academic content that can be drilled and tested rather than understanding literacies and numeracies as forms of power, tools for organizing, fodder for the development of their own original ideas.

Even our supposedly “best” schools—maybe especially these most well-resourced, largely white schools—fail to give young people a chance to teach and learn the meaning, the responsibilities, and the demands of freedom. Schools serving the wealthy do the most extraordinary job teaching children to define success in

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individual rather than collective terms—to get ahead rather than to struggle alongside, to step on rather than to lift up. On any serious measure of practicing freedom, these would be the “failing” schools.

We pay dearly for our failure to teach freedom, for our refusal to insist on being fully human, and for our selection of just a precious few who are granted the right to matter. Our children bear witness to an unimaginable array of examples of throwaway lives: mass shootings in nightclubs, on college campuses, and in elementary schools; bombings in stadiums and cafes, during city marathons, and on trains; countless communities dislocated and eradicated by war, gentrification, and other land grabs.

Though often perpetrated by individuals, such violence thrives as a reflection of and in response to institutional and state-sanctioned violence—historic and ongoing genocide and terror; criminalization and mass incarceration; segregation and poverty; patriarchy, homophobia, and sexual violence; colonization and imperialism; xenophobia, racism, and the enduring supremacy of whiteness. These interconnected machineries of violence are built into the foundation of our nation, and our children saw them given new life and strength when we recently elected a president who explicitly promoted them, celebrated them, and promised to maintain them.

What is the role of education in the lives of children carrying the burden of this witness, breathing these poisons into their delicate lungs?

The images of violence reside in their imaginations, teaching them lessons in throwaway lives and crowding out more beautiful, more human possibilities. Some see the images on television, at a distance. Others live it up close, day to day: taking longer routes to school to avoid the deadliest corners of their neighborhoods; losing their fathers, brothers, and friends to prisons designed for and profiting from their confinement; being evicted from their homes and having their water shut off or poisoned; enduring the fear of

having their parents deported while they work impossible hours for unlivable wages; being murdered by officers of the state hired to protect them.

Our children are learning that only some lives matter, that only some deaths are tragic, that only a precious few deserve relief from suffering. We need schools that offer young people a chance to grapple with these lessons—schools fueled by the imperative to imagine and to create a world in which there are no throwaway lives. Any of us invested in the rights of persons to be free have cause to care about the lives of children at school and to resurrect our imagination for schooling as a deeply human, wildly revolutionary site of possibility.

I am calling on all educators—those in our classrooms, in our homes, and on our streets—to embrace and to respond to the urgency of our collective need to teach love and to learn freedom.

Children—especially the youngest of children—are masters of imagination. When I am burdened by the heavy weight of reality, soul-weary and stuck, young children are able to inspire my imagination for a more playful, more creative way forward. Because designing classrooms in the image of freedom requires an extraordinary degree of imagination, I enlisted the four young children featured in this book—whom I call Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus, to protect their anonymity—to light our path toward a new vision. I will forever be grateful to these six- and seven-year-old teachers. I learned so much from them about how to be truly human, what we are each entitled to just by virtue of being human, and how hard some people must work to be recognized as fully human in everyday life.

I chose these four children carefully. In school we generally identify the most pleasant, most compliant children as our leaders. But if being a leader means doing exactly as one is told, we should wonder what it means to be a follower. I have chosen differently. I asked

teachers to identify the children presenting the most challenging behaviors in their classrooms. Interested in freedom, I needed the children who sing the most loudly rather than those who follow orders for quiet. These are the children who do not always cooperate, who cannot or will not comply with the demands of their teachers. They are the children who make trouble at school—the troublemakers. They have been my teachers and, in these pages, they will become yours.

In my countless visits to classrooms over the last decade, I have witnessed these troublemaking children being punished with regularity—reprimanded, detained, isolated, removed. They are not described as leaders, as children from whom we might learn. Instead, the descriptions are invariably disparaging: angry, damaged, disturbed, out of control, impossible. Justifications for their daily mistreatment are made on the basis of their own alleged bad behavior, as if they themselves have chosen to be treated as less than fully human in school. Thus, they are held personally accountable for the assaults to their personhood that they endure daily in our schools.

Routinely pathologized through testing, labels, and often hastily prescribed medications, these young people are systematically marginalized and excluded through the use of segregated remediation, detentions, suspensions, and expulsions. The patterns of their experiences, especially those of older children, are well documented in what we know about the school-to-prison pipeline. But this pipeline begins disturbingly early. Children as young as two years old are expelled from their preschools at an alarming rate—a rate, in fact, that is more than three times higher than the national K–12 expulsion rate, disproportionately impacting children of color to a degree that should sound civil rights alarms. According to the most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education, black preschoolers are 3.8 times more likely to be suspended than their white peers.¹ These little ones are deemed problem people before they even begin kindergarten.

These troublemakers—rejected and criminalized—are the children from whom we can learn the most about freedom. They make noise when others are silent. They stand up against every school effort to force conformity. They insist on their own way instead of the school's way. These young people demand their freedom even as they are simultaneously the most stringently controlled, surveilled, confined, and policed in our schools. They exercise their power despite being treated as if they have none.

Criminalizing troublemakers is our historic, cultural routine. Folks who demand the rights of people to be free—Mahatma Gandhi, Assata Shakur, Nelson Mandela, Harriet Tubman, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Angela Davis, to name just a few—are regularly detained, jailed, and systematically harassed by officers of the state. This habit persists. We witness protestors in Ferguson teargassed, high school students in Baltimore handcuffed and loaded into paddy wagons while demanding school reform on the steps of their city hall. Jasmine Richards, a Black Lives Matter activist, was convicted for “felony lynching,” jailed because she tried to pull a woman away from the police. Acts of disobedience, even in the name of justice, are punished. Thus, on our streets and in our schools, we are in the habit of incarcerating the people from whom we could learn the most about freedom. We cage the birds singing most loudly.

Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus call out the need for us to listen to their strained freedom songs. If we learn to hear them, we can build our own capacity for refusal and our own imagination for schools, and for a world, in which there are no throwaway lives.

Though this book centers on the rights of free persons to be recognized as fully human, I begin here with some talk of animals—animal sentinels, in particular. Animal sentinels are species purposefully used to provide advanced warning of disease, toxins, and other environmental threats to human lives. They are selected

based on their heightened susceptibilities to particular hazards—the more sensitive they are to the poison, the better—and they are often sacrificed to save us. Bats are used to measure pesticide contamination, mollusks for assessing water quality; honeybees tell us about air pollution. They suffer so we don't have to.

The classic example of an animal sentinel is the domestic canary, used in the early twentieth century to alert miners of deadly carbon monoxide in the coal mines. The miners brought these caged canaries with them into the mines. Because the birds are small and have particularly sensitive respiratory systems, the poison kills them more quickly than it would a human being, leaving the coal miners enough time to save themselves. I remember learning about the miners' canary, shaken by the images of these starkly bright yellow birds, tiny, fragile, beautiful—caged in the dirt and the lightlessness of those mines.

I think of the children who make trouble at school as miners' canaries. I want us to imagine their behaviors—which are admittedly disruptive, hypervisible, and problematic—as both the loud sound of their suffering and a signal cry to the rest of us that there is poison in our shared air. That is, when a child is singing loudly—and sometimes more and more loudly, despite our requests for silence—we might hear that song as a signal that someone is refusing to hear her voice. And we might learn to listen, heeding her warning and searching our air for the toxin triggering her suffering, the harm that simultaneously silences her and forces her to scream out.

Of course, we typically respond to troublemaking by holding children themselves solely accountable for transgressions, searching for problems with their minds or bodies, punishing them through time-outs and detentions that graduate to more consequential forms of exclusion over time, and too often medicating them into docility. When I visit classrooms, it is not at all unusual to see children as young as five made to sit apart from all the other children for weeks at a time, sent out into the hallway as punishment even

during instructional time, or required to sit with their faces to the wall. Isolation, humiliation, and exclusion are commonplace school responses to misbehavior, and these responses happen with such frequency in all kinds of schools that they are considered acceptable and seen as inevitable.

Teacher preparation programs around the country train new teachers to believe that these less-than-human responses are strategies of good classroom management. These often idealistic and earnest teachers-to-be are taught that good teachers command control over students, and they are encouraged to learn to use behavioral systems of reward and punishment that are actually more appropriate for training animals than for educating free human beings.

Teachers-in-training learn to punish transgressions because it is not controversial to be castigated if you misbehave. It is your choice and your fault. This logic is deeply embedded in the American psyche—the nation with one of the highest incarceration rates in the world—and it justifies our decision to throw away young lives by making young people think the fault for that exclusion is entirely their own. It seems impossible to blame a caged bird for its own death in a toxic mine, but we nonetheless manage to do so.

Thinking of these troublemaking children as canaries in the mine is not my own idea. I learned it from Thomas, the father of a five-year-old boy who could not and would not comply with the behavioral expectations of his kindergarten teacher.² Teachers, school administrators, medical doctors, and psychologists all searched for pathology in the mind and body of this child. Their assumption was that the arrangements of school were normal and good, so any child unable to tolerate those arrangements had to be abnormal and bad.

Though the child suffered from a mood disorder, a diagnosable brain illness, Thomas challenged the assumption that the disease made his son inherently broken or bad. Much like the canary's

fragile lungs, this child's brain leaves him more susceptible to the harms of poison. He's more sensitive to harm than the average child. Still, the problem is the poison—not the living thing struggling to survive despite breathing it. After all, in clean air, canaries breathe easily.

With this perspective, Thomas drew attention away from his son and instead toward the toxic air of life in schools—the daily harms that less susceptible children can breathe in more readily: being told what to do and exactly how to do it all day; the requirement to sit still for hours on end; the frustration of boring, disconnected, and irrelevant academic tasks; shockingly little time for free play; and few opportunities to build meaningful relationships in community with other children and loving adults. These were the daily realities his son complained about, reacted to in the extreme, and refused to tolerate. Yet they are all too common in the life of schools, invisible because of their everyday normalcy. Thomas's son made them visible, signaling their danger with his hypersensitive reactions to the harm. He was a miner's canary, warning us all about threats to freedom that we might not otherwise see.

Understanding supposedly broken children as miners' canaries focuses our attention on the toxic social and cultural conditions of schools that threaten and imperil the hope of freedom. Our work as educators and as parents must become an effort to clean our air instead of condemning young people, forcing them and actively training them to tolerate the poison.

Maya Angelou wrote of the caged bird in her well-known poem of that name:

*But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage*

*his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.*

I invite readers to listen carefully to the strained songs of the four young children whose experiences are captured in this book; to understand challenging behavior as the result of clipped wings, tied feet, and the rage that people naturally and understandably experience when their freedom to live as full human beings is limited to the confines of cages.

*The caged bird sings
with fearful trill
of the things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.*

Introduction

On (In)Visibility

In my first year as a teacher, I was lucky enough to meet Anthony. At nine years old, Anthony stood taller than me and knew more about many subjects—dinosaurs, technology, astronomy—than I would ever know. He loved the freedom of learning just enough to hate the constraints of schooling, and he did what I asked only if it happened to coincide with what he wanted to do. His behaviors daunted me as a novice teacher and would likely still challenge me today: talking over his classmates, being physically aggressive on the playground, destroying classroom items, ignoring my directives, walking out of the room. I woke up in the morning anxious about the day with him and went to bed worn out by him. I barely remember whom else I taught in those 180 days; Anthony had made himself both visible and memorable.

At the time, I was a twenty-two-year-old fresh out of teacher training, and I somehow felt that the combination of my credentials and my status as an adult should signal to Anthony my clear authority over him—my earned, legitimate right to control his activities and his behavior. I was in charge of asking the questions and he was charged with answering them. I was the adult, the teacher, the leader. He was the child, the pupil, the follower. We were in a school. All of these facts added up to a clear and singular

conclusion: I had power over him, and his success relied on his ability and willingness to accept that. I didn't much question these roles and expectations because they are normalized in teacher preparation programs and in the everyday life of classrooms, part and parcel of the seemingly natural order of things in school.

Lately, though, as I spend considerably more time with growing babies and toddlers, the demands of school seem increasingly antithetical to how children *be* in the world. With these youngest of people, the desire for self-directed learning is fierce. They move and run and jump and skip; they do not sit still for long stretches. They learn to do new things—crawl, talk, walk—when they are ready, not when adults decide they should be ready. And though dependent on caretakers, young children eagerly seek and exercise autonomy. They tirelessly refuse, protest, and question. *No* and *why* are the favored words of little ones.

School does not welcome this protest, this natural way of childhood. As soon as they cross the threshold of a school building, increasingly under the gaze of surveillance cameras, police officers, and metal detectors in our city schools, they are expected to know a lot about social control and to accept the fact of it. Everyone is at the ready to catch children doing the wrong thing. Unquestioning deference to authority is the requirement and the expectation of school, where adult directives replace children's own desires.

Kids learn the culture of school quickly. In a second-grade classroom I visited, children were tasked with drawing illustrations to accompany newly acquired vocabulary. For the word *obedience*, where I expected a picture of a dog, perhaps, I instead found a young artist who had drawn a row of pupils at their desks sitting straight, hands clasped, facing forward. It was a haunting image and, also, a deeply resonant one.

Some elementary school teachers have proudly managed to hold on to "choice time," a brief moment for free choice and play in an otherwise packed day of formal academic instruction. Still, the very

fact of choice time reveals that the rest of school time *lacks* choice. The relative fun of the preschool years is replaced by the rigidities and demands of formal, comprehensive, compulsory schooling. As Philip Jackson, a researcher of schools, long ago reminded us, there are only three institutions from which Americans are allowed no escape: prisons, mental hospitals, and schools.³

Unsurprisingly, then, kindergarten teachers note many “problems” in children’s transition to school. In one study, researchers found that as many as 46 percent of kindergarten teachers report that more than half their class has trouble following directions; 34 percent report that children struggle to work independently; 20 percent report that their kindergartners have poor social skills and are “immature.”⁴ These figures ought to lead us to question whether the demands of early schooling are reasonable; after all, it seems we should expect immaturity from a five-year-old. If nearly half of our children fail to follow directions, we should question the appropriateness of the requirement.

Instead, we turn a gaze of pathology on children. At the age of five, if you cannot follow directions and work independently, you are likely to begin a long series of interactions with the school’s various mechanisms for identifying, labeling, and remediating deficits. Suddenly and swiftly, children become problems.

Any teacher, in any type of school, can readily and immediately name these “problem children.” Young people who prove unwilling or unable to comply are necessarily problematic and easily identifiable. And despite decades of research on classroom management and discipline—undertaken by psychologists, sociologists, educators, anthropologists, criminologists—so-called bad behavior persists and so does teachers’ nearly universal exasperation with it.

Elementary school teachers, especially in urban centers, name behavioral challenges as their number one issue of concern, often identifying disruptive behavior as the biggest issue facing their

schools. Up to 50 percent of novice teachers who leave the profession in their first five years cite student behavior as their foremost reason.⁵ Anyone interested in the effectiveness and success of teachers, and in their willingness and ability to stay in the profession over the long haul, has reason to care deeply about student behavior.

Those invested in the success and general well-being of children, too, have reason to take interest in how our young people are disciplined in schools. We have known for decades that children who feel themselves to be academically lagging will more often engage in problematic behaviors. Yet, if this is the chicken, there is also an egg; young people who misbehave are often punished by exclusion, therefore missing academic content and falling further behind. "Zero tolerance" policies reign supreme, imposing immediate and automatic punishments for lapses in student conduct, while the use of suspension and expulsion is reaching epidemic proportions despite their well-documented ineffectiveness in curbing incidences of misconduct. Young people are forced to miss school, even as they are simultaneously punished for being late to or absent from school.

Even in schools that do not rely heavily on out-of-school suspension and expulsion, other forms of exclusion dominate the response to noncompliance: time-outs, being sent to the principal's office, in-school detention and suspension, time away from class to work with counselors, social workers, and psychologists, "break" areas that are most often placed apart from the instructional area of the classroom. These are all responses that hinder children's access to academic content and that also threaten their sense of belonging and their ability to contribute to the community of their classrooms.

Students who do not behave by our standards are then not permitted to progress by our standards. Many cases of dropout are actually cases of *pushout*, in which students are suspended and

expelled so often that moving forward in school becomes impossible. Missing out on school, especially in the early grades, when the most formative and basic skills are supposed to be taught, has severe and lasting consequences on a young person's persistence through school and life chances. A recent report published by the Annie Casey Foundation⁶ finds that children who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to leave high school without a diploma. Securing a job with livable wages without a high school diploma is a challenge, to put it mildly. As a result, young people sometimes find it necessary to engage in unlawful underground economies in order to survive, and then we imprison them.

Thus, the withholding of education is a political tool used to maintain and ensure an economic and social underclass. This underclass is defined overwhelmingly by race, disproportionately comprised of black and brown people because of the disproportionate degree to which young people of color are criminalized and pushed out of school. In this way, schools are deeply implicated in the systematic maintenance of the racialized American caste system.⁷

This is a continuation of America's historic legacy of injustice. In the era of slavery, teaching a black person to read was illegal because reading and writing are forms of power, tools for organizing, means to freedom. Removing young children from school, hindering their capacity to acquire such tools, inevitably relegates certain young people—black and brown people, in particular—to a life in modern-day chains.

In short, the policies and practices that we use to discipline children—starting in the earliest grades—have the potential to set off the first in a long line of falling dominoes that might end in a young person facing the direst of circumstances. The consequences of these unjust practices, however, are neither solely individual nor solely economic. If schools fail to offer young people the

chance to imagine freedom, to practice freedom, and to prepare for freedom, it is unlikely that these young people will prove able to create the free country human beings deserve. It may be difficult for a kindergarten teacher to understand the potential impact of her everyday treatment of Anthony on his future life chances and on our collective struggle for freedom, but drawing that connection has begun to take hold in educational research, and it must begin to take stronger hold in everyday teaching practice.

Since beginning my career as a public school teacher and meeting Anthony, I have learned a lot about power and authority, about young children, about what it means to teach and learn, and about what it means to be human in a school building. While completing my doctorate in education I served as director of elementary education at Brown University and at Wellesley College, preparing cohorts of new teachers—and learning so much with and from them. I have since moved to Michigan to continue my research on what teaching has to do with freedom. Perhaps most important, I became a co-parent to my life partner's two wonderful young boys. In this role, above any of my professional roles, I have felt the firsthand urgency of the need for schools more deserving of our children.

Over these many years, I have worked with novice elementary school teachers and their mentors in and around Providence, Boston, and Detroit. I supported their work in public, private, and charter school classrooms; in suburban, urban, and rural classrooms; in multiracial and deeply segregated schools; in progressive and very traditional schools. Despite wide variation in many characteristics of these schools and classrooms, I can always walk into the teachers' lounge and hear the educators complaining to one another about their Anthony. I find Anthony sitting alone in all of these hallways, looking forlorn. I see him at a time-out desk in the back of the classroom, facing the wall. I catch glimpses of him waiting with the secretary for his lecture from the principal.

Indeed, it rarely takes me more than five minutes in a classroom to figure out which child is Anthony. Sometimes teachers apologize on Anthony's behalf before I even spot him for myself. My student teachers want nothing more than to know what to do about Anthony.

This book is interested in Anthony, certainly, and in kids like him, but not in what to do about him. I am concerned instead with what we might learn *from* him about what to do with, and for, all of our children.

In this spirit, the following chapters are portraits of Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus—first and second graders who regularly failed to comply with the demands of their teachers. I found these children by first asking principals to identify their strongest teachers, and then asking those teachers to identify the children posing the most challenging behaviors. It does not matter whether or not these children were “objectively” challenging by some external standard; indeed, placed in different classrooms or schools, they might not be similarly flagged. A “problem child” in one place may go unnoticed in another. What matters is their teachers’ identification, and the resulting interaction between the children and that identification.

I used portraiture,⁸ a research methodology developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, to document the experiences of these children. This approach begins by asking, *What is good here?* This search for goodness was particularly helpful in providing the empathic approach necessary to lovingly understand children so often understood as “bad.” It prompted me to recognize the need to see these four children outside of school, to wonder who they were in other settings. So in addition to seeing the children in their classrooms, I also shadowed them in the other parts of their lives—at home with their grandmas and pets, at the park with their siblings and friends, in karate class. No doubt you will recognize something familiar in these portraits. In them, you will see yourself, your own children, the children you know, or the children you’ve taught.

Importantly, I intentionally include children who differ based on race, gender, and class. All children respond to the arrangements of school, and these responses are strongly mediated by the children's identities (and the teachers' identities). We can learn something about when, whether, and how identities matter in children's interactions with school by including some diversity. Still, it is crucial to continue to acknowledge that young people of color are disproportionately impacted by disciplinary malpractice in schools, and that the ongoing supremacy of whiteness is arguably the most toxic of poisons in the air of our school buildings.

Zora and Lucas attend a relatively wealthy, predominantly white school in the suburbs, while Sean and Marcus attend school in a city that is uniquely racially and socioeconomically diverse. Troublemaking is not unique to "urban" classrooms, despite the disproportionately vigilant spotlight on city schools in the media and in scholarly research. My view is that all children interact with the particular arrangements of their schools, and there is something to learn from how different types of schools arrange their cultures differently. In any kind of school, some children will be practicing the act of refusal.

As you read the portraits of Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus—as you begin to learn a bit about what they are like both at school and at home—I hope you will try hard to hear them, to mine their experiences for lessons on freedom. I ask that you try to view them as canaries tasked with protecting the miners, young people who are being sacrificed, ostensibly for our collective benefit.

These children make otherwise invisible harm both visible and audible, and even if noncompliance is a threat to their own well-being, they persist in signaling the danger. We generally think of "deviance," and of deviant people, as a problem. I have learned to think of deviance as informative, and often as an exercise of

power and free will. The child who deviates, who refuses to behave like everybody else, may be telling us—loudly, visibly, and memorably—that the arrangements of our schools are harmful to human beings. Something toxic is in the air, and these children refuse to inhale it. It is dangerous to exclude these children, to silence their warnings.

The idea of the miners' canary fundamentally changed my understanding of misbehavior. I began to think more critically about the requirement of obedience in schools. Should one *not* make trouble if one's dignity requires it? Should we *not* teach children that sometimes there is a need to break rules, a need to challenge authority, a need to refuse inhumane conditions and arrangements, a need for organized, collective disobedience?

Many are hesitant to assign agency to very young children, and we could engage a debate about the level of consciousness they leverage in their everyday noncompliance. But behaviors are social actions—they happen within social interactions—and children's behavior is a response to context regardless of whether that response is voluntary or involuntary, intentional or unintentional. Every time a child breaks a rule, never mind the purposefulness or lack thereof, she exercises her human right *not* to comply, and she signals something about the demand she refuses to meet. Maybe she can't meet the demand. Maybe she can but doesn't want to. Whatever the case, her noncompliance marks the need to evaluate the demand, not just the child. And her behavior reminds us of her power.

Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus each teach us something important, powerful, and worthy about how to reimagine classrooms in the image of being fully human, and how to teach love and learn freedom. They offer lessons on power and authority, loneliness and belonging, creativity and conformity. Their experiences and insights draw our attention away from the confinement of pathology

and toward the complexity of goodness; away from blame and toward understanding; away from evaluation and toward curiosity. They teach us about how schools—not just children—make trouble. And they sing freedom, with the hope of being released from their cages.