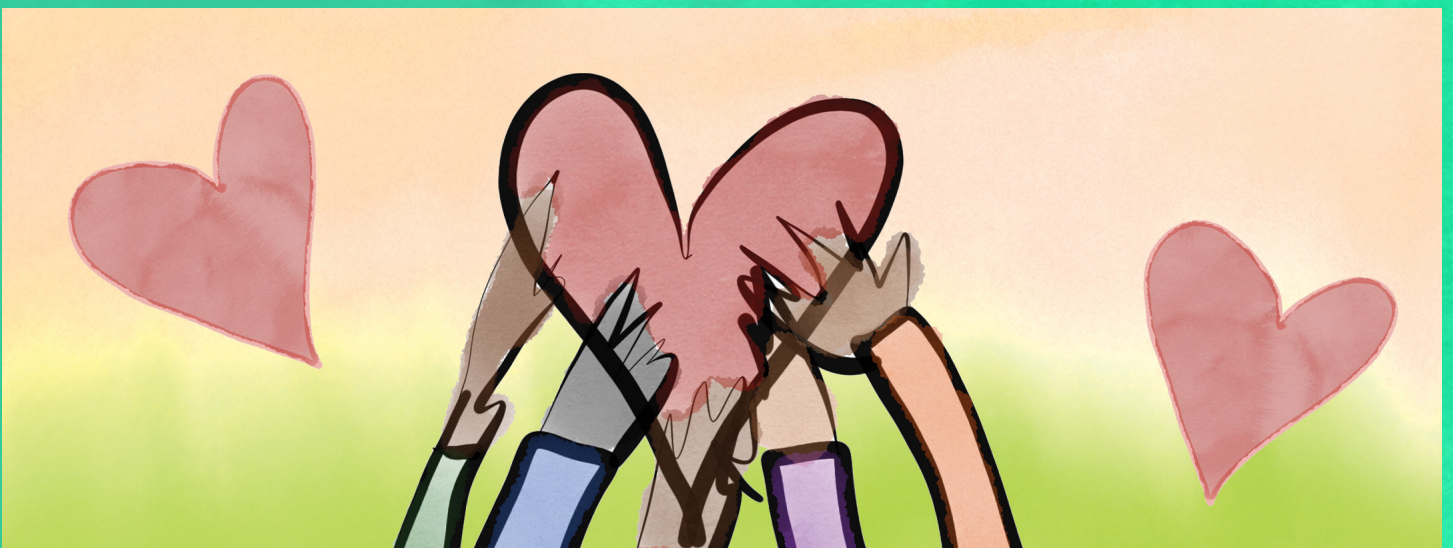


Reflections on Grief, Joy, and Healing: Love and critical consciousness at the center of virtual learning spaces.

Natalie Núñez, Professional Learning Specialist, California Association
for Bilingual Education



I never imagined that a frequent negotiation between doing what I feel is right and protecting my livelihood would be part of my existence as an educator in the public-school system. My days are often filled with mixed emotions that can range from love & joy to frustration & sadness. And now, as I sit here and begin to reflect on the past two years, I realize that I'm having to pause and take deep breaths to help center myself.

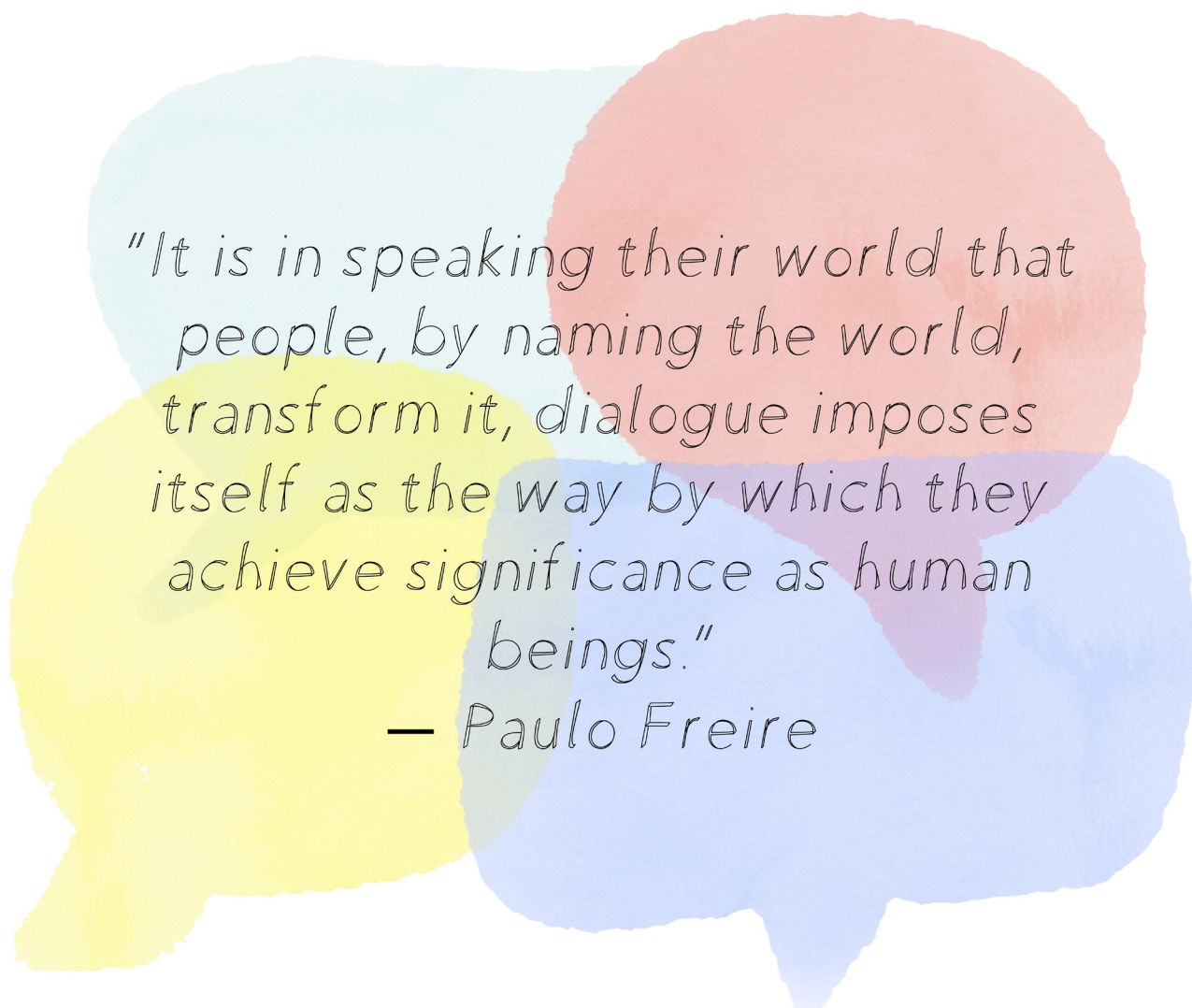
When we began distance learning, I was propelled to reimagine any previous notions I had of what learning would look like and without the constraints of a classroom. Our school community was in crisis and in moments of crisis we all need love, solidarity, and grace. And as we began distance learning, I didn't know how I would teach *sonidos de letras* or provide opportunities for oracy, but I did know that I wanted to be very intentional about creating a virtual space where students and their families knew I was at their service. During the time, stories of sickness, lost loved ones, lost jobs, and struggles with day care came from my students' homes. For many of us, life would never be the same. As a teacher I knew the least I could do was conduct myself in a way that would never be a source of added stress or burden to students and their families.

Returning to in-person learning was difficult. There was the fear of contracting Covid-19, the political conversations among staff, the shortage of staff,

keeping up with quarantine protocols, and not to mention the pressure to address the supposed learning loss. For me, priority of the later has been the most upsetting and sometimes revolting. Many times it feels as if nobody remembers that our students just survived a global pandemic and what our students and schools need now are resources to help recover from traumas of the past three years (really traumas from before the pandemic). The pandemic disproportionately affected schools and communities like mine and yet we continue to do things very much like before the pandemic. Upon our return we still had to issue quarterly grades for the same standards, still issue tardy slips, and still submit students' names for counseling waiting lists- that feel as if the student's safety isn't in danger, they will never be seen, or their needs adequately met. Our schools need clean and working facilities, counselors, nurses, teachers, gardens, music, humanizing pedagogy, and spaces that are safe. Our students need to be celebrated for their resilience and ability to continue to learn under such circumstances - not blamed for the learning loss and problematized.

My days are filled with mixed emotions that stem from questioning if I am complicit in the system that oppresses and continues to perpetuate the dispossession of my own school community? I offer myself comfort by remembering that I try my best to answer

my calling with justice and love at the center of what I do. But those feelings of comfort don't last long and are replaced with guilt when, at a professional development meeting, someone calls our students broken and I failed to speak up. Then the next day, I feel joy as I see our students do amazing things despite all the institutional barriers stacked against them. I'm going to take one last deep breath to finish my thoughts to say, *que la lucha sigue* till the day it's not necessary. Until then, we need to remember to give our own selves radical love and grace.



"It is in speaking their world that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings."

— Paulo Freire