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“Go Back to Better”: An Interview with Cornelius Minor

by Cornelius Minor
with Troy Hicks



Editor's note: This prologue was written by Cornelius Minor in September 2020 as a way to provide context for changes occurring in remote and face-to-face learning this fall.

This year, 2020 shifted the very foundations of our profession. That shift was not without some pain. We have mourned the losses of our classrooms—how we used to be. We've lost the giddy proximity of shared books on a rug, the warmth of a writing conference, or the electric thrill of sitting shoulder to shoulder sharing a calculator to solve a difficult problem. The ways that we have traditionally served students have evaporated. There is uncertainty and directionless policy in its residual wake.

In the face of all these losses, all of us (at some point in this journey) have longed for a return to “normal.” This is understandable. But it is not wise.

Our nostalgic reverence for life pre-March 2020 is misplaced... that even though we felt certain about some things, that there were still too many kids, families, and whole communities left at the margins. Those who lament the hardships of our current moment without considering the pre-pandemic, systemically-orchestrated hardships of food insecurity, joblessness, mass incarceration, and



Cornelius Minor



Troy Hicks

school defunding, as well as inequitable resource distributions that have plagued indigenous communities and communities of color are engaged in an ahistorical retelling of our recent history that robs us of the context required to understand this current moment and to imagine solutions.

Centering whiteness, privileging cis-heteronormativity, and failing to embrace the neurodiversity in our communities is a form of institutional violence that traumatizes.

Our path forward must be defined by individual teachers, school cultures, and pedagogies that work from this understanding. As we move forward, I am more interested in exploring the question, “What if we did not return to normal? What if we returned to BETTER?”

What are the practices, approaches, and habits that we can abandon, and what are the new kid-and-community-centered structures that we can erect in their places?

This is the work that we are called to do right now. We've lost a lot, and we don't have to hold on to the ghosts of the things that we no longer have.

There is life ahead. We can cultivate it.

Interview with Cornelius Minor, conducted by Troy Hicks (April 8, 2020)

In the wake of the 2020 Michigan Reading Association Annual Conference being canceled due to COVID-19 concerns that fell upon our nation in the beginning of March, the opportunity to connect with one of our keynote speakers, Cornelius Minor, through a more intimate interview presented itself.

Minor is a Brooklyn-based educator. He works with teachers, school leaders, and leaders of community-based organizations to support equitable literacy reform in cities (and sometimes villages) across the globe. Minor is the author of the Heinemann title, *We Got This. Equity, Access, and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be* (Minor, 2018).

Providing him with the same questions that formed the core of our call for proposals for this issue, this article is transcribed from a one-hour interview with keynote speaker Cornelius Minor on April 8, 2020, in which we had a wide-ranging conversation about issues related to educational equity and social justice, the uses of technology, and broader themes related to literacy.

Selections from our interview have been transcribed and edited for clarity and concision.

In relation to trauma informed teaching

In what ways are students and teachers being affected by the COVID-19 crisis now? What might the long-term effects be? What changes will we need to make in our classrooms, schools, and communities?

One of the things that I always want to do in all of my work is that I always want to establish a historical perspective. So, when we talk about trauma, the things that we're experiencing right now are not new for specific groups of people. While these things are new to us as a whole population [related to the COVID-19 pandemic]—when we think about our indigenous students, when we think about our students with disabilities,

when we think about are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students, and when we think about our students of color—these things have existed in communities in profound ways, and they've been largely ignored and unaddressed by mainstream schooling.

So, I am always cautious as everyone is rushing out to be “trauma-informed.” I have said quite explicitly that—in both educational research and in my own work that I do in public—unfortunately, we live in America where nothing is a problem until it starts affecting white people. So, I always want to lead with that. When we're talking about “trauma-informed” education, there's a lot that we can learn from communities who have been carrying historical traumas, specifically those historical dramas inflicted by the mechanism of school. There's a lot of learning we can do from indigenous communities. There's a lot of learning that we can do from communities of Black folks. There's a lot of learning that we can do from the LGBTQIA community. So, I don't ever want to talk about trauma-informed education without giving a shout out to people who have been doing this work for generations.

Bringing that forward into this contemporary moment, what can we learn from those communities? First, there is power in being connected to others, and the power of story to connect is real. That said, there's a performative culture associated now with storytelling [through social media]. As a writing teacher, I think one of the things that teachers can do is to really get back to authentic storytelling. That fosters a sense of connection. So, for me, writing workshops have become even more important. Read-alouds have become even more important. The ability for kids to create their own stories, verbally, for them to engage in dramatic play, all of those things have become very, very important right now. They foster authenticity and that fosters the sense of connection.

The second thing that feels really, really important when we think about addressing trauma is understanding that, for many groups of people, school is a perpetrator of the trauma. So, you can't heal in the same place where you got sick. For many people they were made to

feel less than human in school because they were made invisible by the curriculum or in the book choices. For many people, school is a place where the way they learned was not honored. So, when I'm thinking about how we recover from trauma, I'm thinking part of that recovery means identifying that we—in our ignorance at times—are the ones that make kids sick. If we're going to help them get well, that's going to require a different kind of positionality. I cannot use the same tools that I used to poison the kids to cure them.

So, I really got to thinking about things like Universal Design for Learning (Center for Applied Special Technology, n.d.) and how do I make sure that school is a place where all folks can learn. I've really got to think about what it means to be literate, so that writing isn't the only form of literacy, or that reading the books that my teacher likes isn't the only form of literacy. What does it mean to be authentically literate? Because, if we are to heal, we've got to recognize that many of our practices have done incredible harm. For instance, I've been reading lots of the data in New York City about kids who haven't shown up in remote learning. There are students that are not on the grid, and we don't know where they are. They haven't logged in.

So, that's a real thing right now, and often times when we think about what it means to connect to a community, we forget this. Why would I connect to a community, remotely, if I was hurt in that place to begin with, or if my parents were made to feel unwelcome in that place? There was a parent who was shamed, and this was over six years ago, over her son's lunch debt. She couldn't afford to pay her son's lunch money, and the school sent her, essentially, these messages that shamed her. The final message was attached to her son's backpack, and he was a second grader six years ago, and he had to wear that backpack home. The message was on a bright colored sheet of paper that said, "Pay this amount," and that was six years ago. I didn't teach her second grader. I didn't meet him until he came to middle school. But, his mother has harbored that shame for six years in her relationship with the district. Now that she has to connect with schools remotely, she harbors a lot of animosity toward the school. She's like,

"Why would I volunteer into a remote connection with you people when you have never sought to understand my humanity?"

So, if we talk about the trauma of COVID-19 and pretend like it's a new thing, this ignores the struggle of all the people who have endured traumas before. This isn't business as usual, and we aren't trying to recreate exactly what existed four weeks ago in virtual spaces. That's not the point. What existed four weeks ago, again, already left far too many people marginalized. Instead, this gives us a wonderful opportunity to create something new. If we are to address the traumas that come up, it's going to have to come from new thinking. There are no old play books to describe what we're going through.

In relation to socio-emotional learning

After weeks (or months) of social distancing, what norms and routines might we need to establish in our classrooms, both face-to-face and virtual? What emotional and mental health needs will we need to attend to as part of our teaching practice?

To begin, we need to be careful again. In contemporary education, socio-emotional learning has become a brand. They have been capitalized and co-opted. So, I'm not talking about socio-emotional learning in the brand sense. I'm talking about the set of beliefs, practices, and skills that center humanity. So, for me, when I think about the set of practices and beliefs we can enact in the fall (or whenever we resume school), I'm brought to experiences from my work as a New York City educator in the wake of 9/11.

I remember those days and I remember what it was like even months, years later. Especially years later, what it meant to show up in school as a New Yorker, as a kid who experienced that in your classroom, with your friends. I didn't know what I didn't know, from the perspectives of my students. For me, it wasn't like the classroom down the hall that was facing The Towers who saw it happen outside their window.

It didn't even really make sense to me until, oddly,

2007-8, when I was teaching a group of kids who were in sixth grade. They were in first grade when *The Towers* fell, and I remember the moment I was in my class. We were doing a personal essay, and one kid finally developed the language to talk about a thing he had been feeling for years. He didn't have the vocabulary to explain it until he was sitting in my class, writing a personal narrative, years later. I remember the moment and he just started weeping, and I didn't know where it was coming from. It's the kind of teacher thing where you're like, "What's wrong, no one's done anything to you? Where's this coming from?" and he told me, "I finally have the words for that feeling I've been having since I watched those Towers fall in first grade."

That really forced me into thinking longitudinally. A lot of times when we think about socio-emotional learning, we think that it's an activity or a game that we can play with kids during Month 1 of school, and then we can get to the real business of school. One of the things that I want to really lean into in this moment is that it is not an activity, it is not a game, and is not a ten-minute module that I can schedule into a class. This needs to be my stance. This needs to be how I do business.

There are two ingredients in a good stance for me. One, I listen to kids and center the things that they say, even if the things that kids are telling me are hurtful to my ears, or don't sound like I want them to sound. Teachers have this way "tone policing" where "I can only hear the kids who talk like me," or "I can only hear the kids who package the message in the way I want it to be heard." But, here it is. I'm the 6th grade English teacher, and I'm watching this kid weep and go ballistic. It's not how I want to hear it. He's disrupting my class, but he's having this moment where he finally now has the language to describe the terror that he felt six years ago.

So, the message didn't sound like I wanted it to, it didn't sound like him saying, "Hi, Mr. Minor, I'm feeling really depressed today because..." So I had to, in that moment—and I didn't do it perfectly—but I had to say to myself that what he's doing right now, he was disruptive to me, but it's 100% true to him. He's

interrupting my class, he's crying, he's weeping. But, centering kids means it won't sound like I want it to sound, and I've still got to listen. That's ingredient one.

Ingredient two is that—based on what I've heard—how does my pedagogy and my curriculum change? A lot of times, we listen to kids, but it's a fake kind of listening, where the listening doesn't inform what we do, or the listening doesn't change what we do. So, if I've listened to a kid, but then my behavior as a teacher hasn't changed, then what was the point? I'm a fraud. So, really, I listen to kids. What I hear from them has to inform what I do, and then I've got to assess how it went. [Minor then references Grant Wiggins and the book *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), and then returns to the story].

I've got to look and see, "Is the kid moving forward in terms of their development?" When we say "assessment," even that word has been co-opted. People think that "assessment" means giving grades or test scores. If I'm thinking about socio-emotional development, that can show up in any number of ways. For that particular kid, he was unapologetically disruptive all the time in class. And then it finally made sense once I'm like, "Wow, as a first grader, this kid watched *The Towers* fall," and no one's addressed that. I had to recognize that I can't do this alone, that I need the guidance counselor's help, I need the principal's help.

Now, that I understand the "why," I've got to think about, "What's the road forward for this kid look like?" It was important for me to understand that the road forward, I couldn't fix it or cure it, but I've got the rest of his sixth grade year to support him. And I'm probably only going to make a little bit of movement, and I've got to hand him to his seventh grade teacher, who was going to make a little bit more movement. And he went from being "unapologetically loud" in my class to being "apologetically loud" [in that class]. That was the growth we made that year.

So, when I think about what socio-emotional learning or growth looks like in the fall (of 2020), it means understanding that this is a process and—that for every

minute that you are harmed—it takes just that much time or more for you to be healed. So, if kids are in a forced social isolation for four to six months, it will take time.

In relation to remote learning

Whether we are primarily in face-to-face settings or fully online, the shift to virtual education—if it hadn't already begun—is now fully underway. What plans are in place in your classroom, school, and district in relation to the use of technology for supporting learning? How are issues of equity and access being addressed, so all students can be connected to high-leverage learning opportunities?

I am lucky enough to be one of those people that lives in the community where I work, and the reality of my community (central Brooklyn) is that my kids have computers in their home because I'm their dad, but that's not true for everybody in my daughter's class right now. That's a real thing. There are other parents in my own children's classes whose neighbor might have a router (that they can use for wifi), but that's not always the case.

There's this thing that happens in analog school that I see happening again, and I'm really trying to disrupt it, so my thoughts aren't fully formed. You're getting rough draft thinking here. In an analog school what we call "engagement"—when somebody utters that word—is a singular definition. In most traditional schools when you say "engagement," that means the kid is sitting quietly with their eyes on you listening. If you don't get that, then you feel like somehow the kid is disrespecting you.

So, I worked with a kid who is hearing-impaired, for example. I knew he was hearing-impaired, and he would never look at me, he would look at my mouth because that's what he's been trained to do. I wasn't used to that kind of engagement. For me, his mother and his therapist had told me that he's never going to have his eyes focused on me; he's never going to make eye contact, and he's always going to be watching my lips. I knew that, but I would still be like, "Eyes on me." Whenever people ask me if he was engaged, my

immediate answer would be, "No." I would have to shift my stances to be like, "Oh, yes, he is engaged because he was watching my mouth and my hands."

So, let's think about the kids for whom we don't know how they engage. Then it becomes more problematic. Now that I see learning going to these remote methods, people have these singular ideas of engagement. You're engaged if you logged into the Google Classroom. You're engaged if you submitted your assignment. We failed wholeheartedly, and I am going to use this term intentionally, because we thought the "tech bros" would save us with all their fancy apps. All they're really doing is replicating the same harm that happened in analog school. It's more than "Get on your Google Classroom, or get in your Zoom." We can be more creative than that. There can be multiple ways to engage.

So, I've been a huge fan, again, of Universal Design for Learning, and looking at what CAST has been doing; do you [as a teacher] think about multiple ways of engaging kids in a platform, or in what we call "reading?" Some kids might engage with me through Zoom, some kids might engage by telephone. Some kids might engage with me through texting. Some kids might even engage with me through a traditional letter in US Mail. And, I've really been thinking about all of those multiple means of engagement and, for me, understanding that silence is also a form of engagement means that I need to create space for kids to be silent. How can I teach my colleagues how to make these kinds of decisions consistently, over time?

One of the things that we really had to research—and I'm literally fighting for this right now—is that not everybody in my community has a computer. So, the schools did this rollout of computers, but if you've already been shamed by the school then in some way it can be a real barrier. They say, "My kid owes library books, and the school has been after me for the \$20." If the school is been sending you messages for 14 weeks about the \$20 you owe because your kid lost a book, and you can't afford to pay it, then these parents can't comfortably show up to collect a computer. So, my answer to those parents was, "Of course you can [get

the computer]," but the fear that gets ingrained in people is real. If the institution has sent you eighteen bad notes, then the amount of social energy that it's going to take you to show up there will be too much.

So, I am going to name two big things that have informed my own growth in that arena. I think the first part is recognizing who I am, and then recognizing a hero. So, this is literally my own growth trajectory. I would imagine that I'm a lot like most other teachers, that the people who choose to become teachers, more often than not, are the people who were rewarded by how school happened when they were in school, right? Because I am a compliant person, because I'm relatively affable, I did well in school. So, even when my proficiency didn't give me good grades, my compliance did. That's who most teachers are. Most of us as kids were the compliant ones. School rewarded our compliance and school rewarded our affability.

So, we became teachers. And we are continuing to uphold the things that rewarded us. So, it is against my nature to upend those things because I drew benefit from those things. I do get immense social benefit from being compliant, and so being non-compliant in my adulthood goes against my programming. I think it's recognizing who we are, that we are for the most part a compliant, risk-averse group of people [as teachers] and that any social progress that I want requires conflict. So, I have had to unlearn the tendency to be conflict-averse. My hero in that is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A lot of people know about the idea of civil disobedience. Yet, when we think about what civil disobedience actually is, civil disobedience is looking at an unjust rule or practice and intentionally breaking it.

When people ask me, "Well, how did you become Cornelius Minor?" I am like, "Oh, I studied Dr. Martin Luther King, a hero of mine." He would strategically look at a practice that was unjust and create opportunities to break that rule collectively. So, that's what I do in all my work. I look at the rule that gets us to unjust outcomes and then I organize teachers to break that rule. For the people on the bubble, they need organization. They need to break the rule. We are stra-

tegically identifying the rule and then we're all going to break it together. So, if they come after one of us, they got to come after all of us.

This is what the Montgomery Bus Boycott was. This rule hurts us. But, if I break the rule alone, I'm going to get in trouble. So, we are all going to organize and break the rule at the same time. That's how I've learned you do it. I've grown up a Brooklyn teacher. I grew up with mentors like Kate Roberts, her wife Maggie, Chris Lehman. So I grew up with the kind of older teachers on my team who are already demonstrating this kind of behavior. It was really easy for me to grow up into this kind of behavior because those people were my mentors.

We are going to see a lot of kid-blaming and community-blaming. "You, Black kid, who doesn't have internet access at your home oh, your reading levels didn't go up because of some personal or communal flaw." Or, "you, disabled kid..." or "you, gay kid..." I was in a meeting yesterday evening and one of the things that we're experiencing are the racial disparities in the COVID deaths because of access to healthcare. It's an old adage that my dad used to say: "White people catch a cold, Black folks catch pneumonia." Everything is worse because of the societal infrastructure that continually marginalizes poor folks, African-American folks, disabled folks, gay folks. When we get back to school, the kids who will be consistently blamed for not making progress during the time of remote learning will be our Brown and Black children, our poor children. It will be the kids who suffered the most trauma while they were away, the kids who lost grandparents.

You know, we have years of sci-fi that tells us how this is going to play out. From Asimov to Collins, it is going to go to the poorest who will get it worse. I've been reading a lot of X-Men lately. They're going to be groups of people who are going to be so marginalized—despite the contributions they can make to society—and that's what I'm afraid of. Those are the groups of people who are marginalized already, but just in invisible ways. Now that those ways have been rendered visible, people are going to enter the state of

willful ignorance. You're already seen it on social media, where people are avoiding talking about the real things. The conversations that I'm having in schools or people will say, "Well, Cornelius, what you're bringing up is uncomfortable." And, I'm like, "Yeah, but it exists here." [Note: This interview was conducted in early April, well before the murder of George Floyd and the weeks of global protests that began as a result of his death].

I know this sounds really silly, but I was working with a superintendent and she was saying to me, "I just don't know how to reach certain communities." I was like, "Well, ask them." She asked, "What do you mean?" I said, "Call someone that's a member of that community and ask them. Call more than one someone, call ten someones and ask them." She was like, "I can't do that." And, I asked, "Well, who says?" And she said, "That's not how we make decisions here." Then, I said, "Well, your decision-making mechanism is flawed."

We were talking as her district was three weeks into remote learning, and they'd identified the kids who are off the grid, and, in her district, they were the language learners. I think it was 12% of her district that was the language learning population, and mostly kids who are Hungarian-Polish, Eastern European. "Those kids are off the grid, so reach out." It wasn't a novel idea, but she said she'd never reached out to them before. Then my question became, "Well, how have you been teaching them all these years?"

She replied, "We try to invite them to meetings, and they don't come." I replied, "Probably because they don't speak English." So, all of those things that feel obvious in my mind, I'm learning, aren't obvious. I've really been working with her. She's said, "I don't know how to have these conversations in my circles." I said, "That's because you are in the wrong circles. We can broaden the circle. If your circle doesn't include your Polish immigrant community, then it is a flawed circle." We really had to brainstorm. She asked, "How would I invite them to communicate with me?" And, I said, "Well, you're probably going to need a translator." I thought, secretly, that you probably should have been

having a translator at the PTA potluck before. That would have been helpful. But, it's all of these things that she'd never thought about before. And she kept repeating, "That community just never comes to things we invite them to, so we just got tired of inviting them and not coming."

So, that's the stance of so many districts. Traditional mechanisms. If your potluck only attracts the parents who don't have a night job, then that's not real community engagement. It's fake community engagement for the people that you actually value. We can do it, but it requires a different kind of engagement.

So, now, thinking about what the "new potluck" is—that this mechanism we used to support remote learning may not be working. Even if, you know, it's the first snow day—and hopefully that's the biggest problem we have in the future—and we try remote learning. But what if it's multiple weeks because of another pandemic? Part of it is having the translator, but it also takes a language of genuine invitation, language that is actually meaningful to that community as well.

For that superintendent, we reached out to the local Greek Orthodox Church, a hub of community activity. When we got the pastor and the deacons of that church to support our outreach so we could reach more families, it was a simple fix. Members of the community were still showing up at remote religious observances, so after one call with the pastor he was like, "Oh, I can get all those people on the phone in ten minutes." This thing that had been eluding her for twenty years was solved in ten minutes by making the right phone call. So, I wonder, what was the barrier to making that phone call twenty years ago?

In relation to staying connected

What systems of support have you and your colleagues put in place for your students, and for yourselves? What technology tools, regularly-scheduled events, and protocols for working together, both synchronously and asynchronously, have emerged for you in this time of crisis?

What's funny is that it's all the organic stuff. It's been

the random phone call from a kid that misses me, or when I got on Twitter with some kids that I taught many years ago. They asked me for my Animal Crossing friend code!

So, it's been stuff like that. The informal stuff is teaching me to think that I don't want to connect to school just for coming to school, but to make human connections. When I think about remote learning, I think about how I've got a Zoom call soon where I'm going to be talking about hip hop with a colleague. It's a public Zoom, where we're just going to be talking about our favorite hip hop albums, and we've had over 500 people register for that Zoom. A lot of my informal get-togethers have been around *Animal Crossing* or hip hop or the new Jay Electronica album. Then the school stuff happens organically, because we get to this really human place.

I think that in a rush to replicate what at existed four weeks ago, we've ignored the fact that what existed was never really for kids to begin with. When we're talking about school, when we're talking about how kids gather with their friends in the schoolyard, they're not talking about that hot new algebra problem. They're gathering to talk about Pokemon. They're gathering to make plans for tonight. When they got on the subway, it wasn't like "Oh, I can't wait for algebra." It was because they were going to see their friends. So, we need to make remote spaces for that as well.

I've been really cautious to remind people that the thing we had four weeks ago was not normal. That thing we had four weeks ago still left far too many people in the margins. So, this is an opportune moment for us to reinvent ourselves. I don't want to return to normal. I want to return to better. The thing that we had four weeks ago left out too many students of color. That thing that we had four weeks ago left out too many poor kids. That thing that we had four weeks ago left out too many disabled kids. If we were to go back to that thing consciously, that's messed up.

We can go back to a thing that actively works to include disabled kids, that actually works to include

kids who are children of color, or poor kids, or gay kids. So, that's what I want. And that's what I hope that people are striving toward. And we're not going to find that in yesterday's playbook. We've got to write a new playbook.

I really like that I don't get to go back to normal, and that I can go back to better.

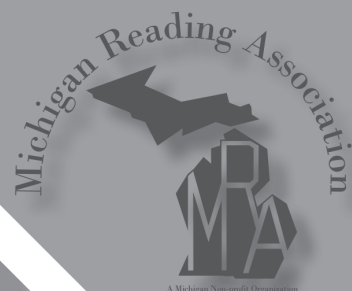
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