

## CONNECTED ARTS NETWORKS QUARTERLY SESSION, NO.2 EQUITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

The **Connected Arts Networks (CAN) project** establishes national virtual Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) for educators in dance, music, theatre, visual and media arts. CAN aims to build a sustainable model of professional learning for arts educators in public schools to strengthen their leadership skills and build their capacity to address social-emotional learning and equity, diversity, and inclusion in their arts instruction. Find out more about the project and our partners [here](#).

CAN is committed to creating equitable and inclusive arts classroom spaces for students of all ages, abilities, genders and racial and ethnic backgrounds. In this document, you'll read about experiences from current CAN Teacher Leaders. Their personal inquiry questions about how to proactively integrate culturally responsive teaching practices and how to build community in the arts classroom are leading to increased engagement and leadership in students. We acknowledge that community by community, educators across the country face varying degrees of support and/or challenge in implementing this important work. We encourage educators to consider which strategies in this Tip Sheet might best serve their students and uplift their voices. To hear more from Teacher Leaders, [visit our website](#) for a CAN podcast episode on this topic.



How can arts educators play an essential role in uplifting student voice, creating community, and implementing culturally responsive practices in order to impact student learning and agency?



## Michael Gordon (he/him/his)

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Michael S. Gordon is a music educator, co–music instructional leader for fine arts and performing arts, as well as the equity and inclusion instructional leader for Wilton Public Schools, where he has guided the work of staff, students, parents, and community leaders. Michael also served as the resident director for *A Better Chance of Wilton* where he worked to bridge the cultural differences between students of color and their white peers. Michael’s philosophy is: Conversations lead to interaction, interactions lead to understanding, understanding leads to trust, trust leads to compassion, compassion leads to inclusion, and inclusion leads to equity. Conversations of race, diversity, inclusion, and equity must be intentional, open, and honest.

### **Community:** What is your process for creating inclusive, diverse educational experiences that engage all students and elevate historically marginalized voices?

Success for any endeavor requires C.A.R.E. (Conversations, Access, Responsibility, Evaluation) Success begins with conversations, which involves 1. the exchange of ideas, opinions, experiences, 2. the sharing of knowledge, skills, insights, and feelings, as well as 3. the acknowledgement of how valuable and precious participants are (even when we don’t agree). Success thrives when everyone is familiar with how to access and apply available resources. The manifestation of success requires that all stakeholders be aware of, accept, and work towards fulfilling their respective responsibilities. The efficacy and implementation of each strategy, practice, procedure, and protocol must be evaluated for success to emanate beyond the moment.

### **Action Research:** What questions or wonderings are you exploring in your own teaching practice this year around equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility? What helps you push past the surface to see and address a potential area of growth?

I am exploring ways to help white allies become more confident and authentic in their approach to this work. In parallel, I am working to guide everyone beyond an equity mindset towards manifested liberation. I am exploring the question: Why does it take a white voice to make actionable change a reality?

To help me push past the surface, I invite a diverse group of friends, colleagues, family, allies, and foes (i.e. those with an oppositional mindset) to discuss perceptions, boundaries, barriers, and systems. I incorporate articles, webinars, and first-person testimonies to help us be more reflexive in our thinking.

### **Impact:** What happens when teachers honor and encourage student voice and agency? Is there a specific story/moment you might share?

I believe the truest intent of education is realized when teachers honor and encourage student voice and agency. Students take more ownership, are more engaged, hold each other more accountable, and make more responsible decisions when their input is solicited and used by educators to plan assignments. We need to empower students by demonstrating our trust in their ability to make meaningful decisions, reflect on their choices, and adjust their approaches as needed.

### **Resources:** What educational resources related to equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility would you recommend to colleagues right now?

I recommend the following books to anyone diving into this work right now:

- For everyone: *Courageous Conversations about Race* by Glen Singleton
- Particularly for people of color: *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* is a book by Layla Saad
- Particularly for white allies: *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* by Robin DiAngelo.

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“I am exploring ways to help white allies become more confident and authentic in their approach to this work. In parallel, I am working to guide everyone beyond an equity mindset towards manifested liberation.”

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### **Reflection:** Why are you committed to this work right now? Why do you keep showing up?

I am committed to this work because communities are still being marginalized, which affects the students and families we interact with. I keep showing up because I must continue to fight the good fight. If I wait for someone else to do the work, I will be complicit in perpetuating the systems of inequity. Just like the wall of Jericho, the wall will come down when we all unite our voices and act together.





## Gayle Nicholls-Ali (she/her/hers)

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Gayle Nicholls-Ali is an award-winning arts educator, photographer, writer, and teacher leader. She has been an educator at La Cañada High School since 2007, an adjunct professor at Pacific Oaks College School of Human Development and Education from 2017 to 2022, and a digital storytelling facilitator assisting foster care youth for over a decade. Gayle's awards include La Cañada USD Teacher of the Year, the Los Angeles County Office of Education Technology Integration Award, the 11th Annual Crystal Apple Award Honoree, LACOE Digital Voice Award, and the Scholastic Art & Writing Distinguished Teacher Award.

**Community:** What is your process for creating inclusive, diverse educational experiences that engage all students and elevate historically marginalized voices?

Beyond lessons that expose students to a variety of artists, I engage students in activities that get them to collaborate, embrace similarities and celebrate their difference. It's important for me to get to know my students and I share my experiences with them, as well. I ask students to make art about themselves, their families, and their friends. I want students to share what they care about. Through art exploration and artmaking, I create a space for open dialogue. For students with special needs, my classroom is where they can find meaningful relationships with peers, and peers learn about inclusion.

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**“As a high school teacher, I must be culturally responsive. When students explore their own identity and examine and celebrate their culture, their artmaking can be transformative for themselves and their peers.”**

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**Action Research:** What questions or wonderings are you exploring in your own teaching practice this year around equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility? What helps you push past the surface to see and address a potential area of growth?

I am wondering about how English language learners and second-generation immigrant students bring their cultural experiences, language, and background to their art-making. I am interested in hearing their voice, their interpretation of traditional Eurocentric art, and art from their perspective and countries. As the world begins to shrink and more museums and art resources are going online, I am exploring art from all over the world. As I learn, I generously share the art and stories of artists with my students. This helps me push back and address areas of growth.

**Impact:** What happens when teachers honor and encourage student voice and agency? Is there a specific story/moment you might share?

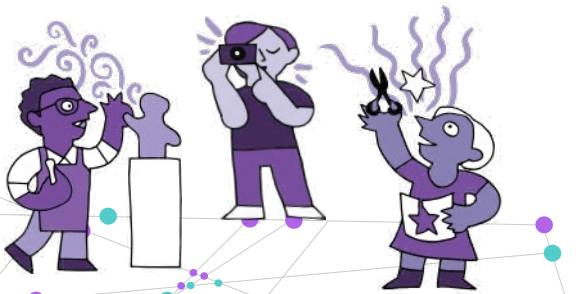
As a high school teacher, I must be culturally responsive. When students explore their own identity and examine and celebrate their culture, their artmaking can be transformative for themselves and their peers. A few years ago, a Japanese-American student explored the fading memories of her Japanese childhood before coming to America. Her introspection crossed personal and political boundaries. She explored the history of the Japanese in America and her personal history. Her critical reflection was extraordinary and empowering. This type of introspection was extremely empowering. When students can intentionally produce and analyze their own work, this is real agency.

**Resources:** What educational resources related to equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility would you recommend to colleagues right now?

- [Art21.org](https://www.art21.org) has a full list of contemporary artists. Sign up for their art21 newsletter for the latest Art21 films, resources, and events.
- [Learning for Justice](#): Film kits and lesson plans to the building blocks of a customized Learning Plan—texts, student tasks and teaching strategies for teachers (Website)
- [Coaching for Equity, Conversations that Change Practice](#) by Elena Aguilar (book) We are creating the next generation of leaders, thinkers, and art makers/world shapers. It's packed with resources to dismantle educational inequities and imagine schools with equity for all students.

**Reflection:** Why are you committed to this work right now? Why do you keep showing up?

As an immigrant and new American citizen, I am committed to learning about the lives and perspectives of my students and sharing my own experience with them. I am moved by student stories of microaggressions, misunderstandings, and prejudice. I am also committed to dismantling systems of oppression in education. I keep showing up because art is unpredictable, and it is exciting to see students grow their artistic perspective and get a deeper understanding of their place in the world. I think art is the great equalizer and at the same time, it is also transcendent. Artmaking is transformational.





## Bridget Shepard (she/her/hers)

Theatre Arts Teacher

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Educational  
Theatre  
Association™

Bridget Shepard is a drama teacher, wife, and mother of two. She became an educator after leaving a 9-year corporate career to become a stay-at-home parent, but her lifelong passion for theatre soon led her to create an after-school theatre program. As the success of the program grew, Bridget realized her calling as an educator and became a full-time drama teacher. She currently serves as the theatre arts teacher and arts department lead teacher at Lillie May Carroll Jackson School, an all-female charter middle school in Baltimore City, Maryland.

**Community:** What is your process for creating inclusive, diverse educational experiences that engage all students and elevate historically marginalized voices?

My process for creating inclusive, diverse educational experiences is ensuring my historically marginalized students are learning about plays and characters that look like them and that they can relate to. I also make sure they not only know about plays applicable to them but I also try to incorporate materials from other cultures. I also have them write their own scripts to be performed in class. For students less engaged, I find what aspects of the lessons intrigue them and restructure how they present their work. My students HAVE to take my class, so engagement is a constant, ever-evolving process.

**Action Research:** What questions or wonderings are you exploring in your own teaching practice this year around equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility? What helps you push past the surface to see and address a potential area of growth?

The questions and wonderings I am exploring all revolve around finding ways to introduce my students to theatrical works from other cultures, as well as how to keep engagement and interest high. My difficulty lies in these facts: my students are not theatre students and have to take my class so I am constantly wondering how to engage those less interested in theatre, and how to find ways to explore work outside of their culture when they are not very interested in theatre as a whole. My wanting my students to be well rounded in diverse cultural work drives me.

**Impact:** What happens when teachers honor and encourage student voice and agency? Is there a specific story/moment you might share?

When teachers honor and encourage student voice and agency, students feel heard, seen, and validated. They become more engaged and motivated to see more of their stories at the forefront of society, and once they realize they are being heard, they often have the potential to become allies with issues of equity, diversion, and inclusion.

**Resources:** What educational resources related to equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility would you recommend to colleagues right now?

- *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* by Zaretta Hammond
- *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education* by Christopher Emdin

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**Reflection:** Why are you committed to this work right now? Why do you keep showing up?

I am committed to this work because there is a big push to bring the arts into Baltimore City schools. I want to try to get our students in Baltimore City all the theatrical exposure I can. Not just through going to see plays, but also with quality curriculum and educational materials that I am learning from being a part of CAN.





**Lindsey Bauer (she/they)**

**Lead Dance Teacher**

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Lindsey Bauer is a dance artist, teacher, and choreographer in New Haven, Connecticut, who aims to promote inclusivity, visibility, and collaboration. Lindsey is the lead teacher in the Department of Dance at Cooperative Arts & Humanities High School (Co-op), and advisor for the National Honor Society for the Dance Arts, the Senior Capstone Project, and a mentor for beginning teachers. At Co-op, she has taught classes in technique and choreography, cowritten curriculum, served on committees, and engaged in collaborations, productions, and events. She is also co-artistic director for Elm City Dance Collective, a nonprofit organization providing dance experiences in the community.

**Community:** What is your process for creating inclusive, diverse educational experiences that engage all students and elevate historically marginalized voices?

All students need to feel seen and represented, especially those who are historically not. In those cases, it is imperative that they see themselves in what we study. I present materials that center the work of those not often centered. For example, instead of using the New York City Ballet, I highlight Dance Theater of Harlem. In terms of content that is new to the students, looking at who they are, what they already know, I try to voice a perspective unheard or new to them. Last year we explored Asian American art into our choreographic study.

“...together we made a solution that allows [students] choice and leadership in the upcoming performance. After our talk, the students’ performance in class was deliberate, energized, and improved”

**Action Research:** What questions or wonderings are you exploring in your own teaching practice this year around equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility? What helps you push past the surface to see and address a potential area of growth?

For the first time in a few years, I have a student who has a physical disability in my dance technique class. The student has one arm that cannot fully extend. I have noticed some of my language in describing a shape of the arms, as not supportive of the student that I have. So, I have been monitoring my language and making sure that when I provide imagery and cues for students that those cues are what students aim for, and not highlighting what things “shouldn’t look like”.



**Impact:** What happens when teachers honor and encourage student voice and agency? Is there a specific story/moment you might share?

When teachers honor student voice and agency, students feel empowered to own their process, their performance, and their learning. Students develop respect for the teacher. Just this week some of my students felt they weren’t getting enough responsibility in the performance. They came to me and expressed some thoughts about class that were a little hard to hear, but I listened and took some time to see their perspective and together we made a solution that allows them choice and leadership in the upcoming performance. After our talk, the students’ performance in class was deliberate, energized, and improved.

**Resources:** What educational resources related to equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility would you recommend to colleagues right now?

- Dr. Ibram X. Kendi: Professor and Author: [Updated edition of How to be an Anti-Racist; How to Be a \(Young\) Antiracist; How to Raise an Anti-Racist, Be Antiracist-workbook](#) and [podcast](#)
- Dr. Bettina Love, Professor and Author, [We Want to do More Than Survive, Abolitionist Teaching Network, @atn\\_1863](#)
- Elizabeth Kleinrock: ABAR educator, author, K12 teacher; [LearningforJustice.org](#); [@teachandtransform](#)

**Reflection:** Why are you committed to this work right now? Why do you keep showing up?

I am committed to this work right now because it is imperative for actual growth, and because my students, communities, and society needs me and everyone else to be committed to this work. I don’t see any other way to live, but to be committed to working towards a future that is more just, equitable, and inclusive.