Who is They?

By Lisa Kenner and Gabrielle Lyon

“Go on. Have at it.” Thus challenges Daniel Burnham on the final page of *No Small Plans*. He speaks directly to the reader, enjoining them to forge the future—their future. He challenges them to become planners, decision makers, agents by design of a city that is livable for everyone.

**“THEY” MATTERS**

Meanwhile, in middle school classrooms on the West Side of Chicago students pronounce, “*They* don’t care about this neighborhood.” In a South Side Community Circle comprised of 18–24 year old African-American men, comments arise, “*They* keep channeling guns into our community.”

Being a young person of color in our time is wrought with peril and promise. For a young person who has been disenfranchised or disempowered by choices made by those in power, feeling unseen and unheard is hard, real and familiar, especially for youth of color and particularly when they live in poverty. People in charge, decision-makers are “*they.*” Faceless, nameless others.

“*They*” is ubiquitous in daily language. “*They*” is default for people in control, hidden and opaque in both intent and identity. “*They*” is a placeholder for those behind the scenes; a pronoun often used by those who feel they are not in control or informed. As educators when we hear “*they*” used by young people we need to understand it as a stand-in for lack of knowledge, clarity, access and agency.

As transformative educators one of our primary goals is to nourish the agency of all learners. We work to provide opportunities for young people to discover and hone perception, reflection, and curiosity as critical filters; to catalyze engagement and participation and to be “woke” to realities of injustice, inequity and privilege; not just to survive but to thrive.

Committing to this can be a fearsome undertaking for both learners and educators. Where to start? *No Small Plans* provides an opening for challenging conversations that explore “Who is they?”

Why even explore the question “Who is they?” Our goal is to complicate the narrative and confront assumptions. In the process of doing this we have the chance to foster empathy and empower stewardship.

**NO SMALL PLANS: A VERB, A RESOURCE**

*No Small Plans* is an interdisciplinary exposition of the roots of Chicago’s current community assets, the impact of long-standing injustices of racism and poverty, the importance and possibility of civic engagement of all generations and the powerful, authentic efficacy of youth. Vibrant characters face real dilemmas and devise paths forward. Within the pages we see young people discover new truths about themselves, about their communities and about other people’s communities.

Enduring truths resonate in the images and text:
Co-Create Community Values

Tell students you will be co-creating a community values document to encourage and provide safe space for dialogue. Discuss assumptions, name common fears and create a shared agreement at the launch of the year or unit. These values ground the work of the conversations which are to come.

- **Ask learners what they need in order to have “real talk.”** Examples include: Be brave. Take risks. Listen actively. Seek different points of view. Ask questions. Explore multiple answers. No passengers, all hands on deck. Leave your comfort zone. Embrace growth.
- **Discuss the core premise of self-efficacy.** Smart is something we become, not something we are or are not.
- **Acknowledge the expertise and importance of everyone in room.** Every person is an expert in their own life experiences.
- **Be explicit that the purpose of dialogue is discovery, empathy and personal change.** We want to explore different perspectives, discuss quantifiable facts and personal experiences, and we want to leave space for changing perspectives. Making errors and shedding misconceptions are central to learning, not evidence of inferiority or lack of intelligence. It is okay to have an unpopular view as well as to change your mind. Pioneering thoughts are often initially rejected or discarded by others.
- **Encourage the goal of cognitive dissonance!** Embrace the disagreement about ideas, not personal rebuttals. Reframe language as needed to help students learn to couch disagreeing statements effectively. We are practicing “civic discourse”—something young people rarely see today from adults in daily life, politics or the media.

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- Young people are empowered, authorized and expected to participate in authoring the future.
- Individuals and neighborhoods are dynamic, and simultaneously illuminate history and change.
- Personal and collective decisions impact the environment and daily fabric of people’s lives, now and in the future.
- Preordained destiny is a myth; design and decision-making prevail.
- There is no such thing as a “small plan.”

*No Small Plans* provides “mirrors and windows” for learners to see themselves in relationship to the built world around them. As we follow characters’ expeditions into the past, present and future we see their perspectives change through their experiences with the city and with each other. These changes create a unique excuse to talk with students about the complex realities of living in a city including neighborhood change, development, construction, gentrification, racism, power, ethics, and belonging. The book gives us an excuse to raise the question, head on, “Who is ‘They’?”

**CLASSROOM VOICE AND CHOICE: GETTING STARTED**

It is natural to feel unsure about diving into conversations about injustices. It can be intimidating to grapple candidly with the kinds of complex subjects that usually go unnamed and unexplored in daily instruction. In order for students to be able to take intellectual and emotional risks, educators need to establish trust and a sense of belonging for learners.

Here are some specific techniques that can help launch—and guide—conversations about challenging subjects:
Commit to Rules of Engagement.

After discussing shared classroom values, establish rules of engagement. Rules of engagement describe what it “looks like” and “sounds like” for participants to “live” their stated values. These function as rules of the road: without them, accidents and breakdowns are more likely and can be more severe.

- Examples of rules of engagement include: One voice at a time. Listen actively. Avoid interruptions. Use “I” statements. Use nonverbal cues (like a raised hand) to indicate wanting to share.
- Preview the rules of engagement daily at first, thereafter periodically to sustain momentum or to renorm after a challenging episode.
- Allow and protect “think time” through techniques such as free writing before responding, pair and share structures, and, ideally, learner-moderated conversation.
- Calibrate participation and ask students to reflect on their own participation. If one tends to share regularly, ask them to step back to create space for other voices in conversation. If one tends to listen more than share, ask them to step up and take the risk to voice or question.
- Consider crafting and posting an anchor chart of sentence stems such as “I agree with ____ because; I disagree with ___ because; To build upon what ____ said…” to provide on ramps to conversation.

Set and Conclude Your Practice

Start each conversation with a simple greeting where each voice is heard and shares a response to a non-urgent, “low-octane” question. The goal is to have all voices get air time and to model norms of sharing and listening.

- Arrange seats in a circle if space allows, or ensure students seated in a way that every person can see and hear everyone.
- Establish classroom roles for students to own aspects of the facilitation process, such as a timekeeper, a scribe to keep notes, attendant to revisit “parking lot” issues and a docent to lead reflection on rules of engagement in action.
- It is important to conclude conversations. Protect time (3 minutes minimum) for closing. Ask three voices to summarize take-aways from conversation. Seek reflections about how well the group implemented the rules of engagement Identify goals for next the next discussion.

Participate Yourself

The teacher is ultimately the authority figure and must be aware of the power they hold in classroom life and society. It is the teacher’s responsibility to set a tone of candor and to explicitly name the importance of grappling with hard things, especially around issues of race, class, gender. This is best said and done directly. Students watch our actions as clearly as they hear our words.

- The expert in anything was once a beginner. In community conversations, each person has the safe space to share their truths without condemnation. It is important to state that everyone is being asked to exit comfort zones and remind everyone that the classroom is empowered, authorized and expected to hold positive intent as much as possible.
- Show the way. Model full engagement and risk taking as a learner and classroom community member. Feel authorized to say “I don’t know,” and “I’m not sure.” Forgive yourself for not being perfect or having all of the answers. Tell students that during your conversations your intention is to help foster critical thinking: you are not disagreeing or trying to “be nosy,” but, rather, want to understand and hear each student’s “truth” in a given situation, or on a given topic.
• **This is important, hard work.** Reaffirm candidly and regularly that it can be uncomfortable and important to have these kinds of conversations. Remind yourself and your students that complex issues require stamina and time to analyze, let alone to address and change.

• **Be ready for students to want to take action**—and for them to feel frustrated about how or where to start. Find ways for students to apply their concerns to conundrums in classroom or school life in real time. Dive in on a low-risk project.

• **Our greatest tools?** Questions, wait time, neutral questions and engaging the hearts and minds of other experts (students) if and when the conversation hits walls. If a conversation goes off the ropes, adjust, keep trying and don’t abandon goals! Revisit the breakdown, name it, but don’t dwell on it. Breakdowns create space for future breakthroughs.

### DEMYSTIFYING “THEY”

You’ve set up your classroom, established shared values and rules of the road. What could engagement look like? Here are some “they” conversations that could unfold in a city classroom discussion using *No Small Plans* as a jumping off point. *(Note: It’s important to appreciate that having critical conversations can require bravery on the student’s part, especially if the teacher/facilitator is white. It is important for white educators to actively acknowledge their own cultural experience and identity as an authority figure. Teachers need to affirm directly that it is not only OK, but important, to be candid and to use specific words regarding race, class and gender—and this means using words like “white.”)*

“**They keep pushing us out of the neighborhood.**”

Who is they? “White people with money.”

How do you know? “They bought our house.”

What policies or systems contribute to this? “Jobs, lack of employment, mortgage loans, generational wealth, white privilege, local government, the alderman, rich people…”

What can you do?

What can other individuals or organizations do?

Do others agree with this? Anyone have other ideas?

“**They don’t care if we don’t have a rec center.**”

Who is they? “The city. The Mayor.”

How do you know? “If they cared we would have one.”

How does this happen? “They just don’t pay attention.” “They put the rec center someplace else. Downtown.”

What can you do?

What can individuals or organizations do?

What policies or systems contribute to this? “Maybe the budget?” “The Park District.”

Do others agree with this? Anyone have a different point of view?

“**Our neighborhood is unsafe because they keep channeling guns into our communities.**”

Who is they? “The government”

Be more specific. “Gun companies”… “Police”

How do you know? “Dirty cops put gun on my friend and locked him up.”

What can you do? “Nothing.”

Do others agree with this? Anyone have a different point of view?

“**They want Chicago to be segregated.**”

Who is they? “The city. The Mayor.”

How do you know? “Look at our school—everyone is Black/Hispanic/poor.”

How does this happen? “They make it too expensive to move away.” “They don’t take care of our neighborhood so people don’t want to move here.”

“They like to be with who they already know.”

What policies or systems contribute to this?

What can you do?

What can individuals or organizations do?

Do others agree with this? Anyone have a different point of view?
Demystifying “they” can become a habit.

Demystifying “they” can become a habit that you can encourage your students to practice outside the classroom as well as during facilitated discussions. Having answers is not the goal during these conversations, the goal is to enable critical questioning, reflective dialogue and evidence-based observation as a skill and habit.

- **Hone generalizations.** Clarify generalizations and nebulous pronouns. Push learners to use specific language. Whittle away the use of “they” as a place holder. Instead, seek specific names of individuals or groups. If the identity of decision-makers is unknown, name this and explore ways to research, inquire, surface facts.

- **Practice empathy for diverse experiences.** Experiment with discussing points of view of various stakeholders. What do you imagine are their priorities? Fears and hopes? How do the changes impact the current reality and future possibilities of each stakeholder? What is the presumed intention of each party? How could we know for sure?

- **Build a knowledge base.** Learners need to gather, distill and analyze accurate information on which to build theories and understandings. “How do you know?” Regularly providing evidence, be it life experiences or quantifiable data, to support opinions is vital. Personal experiences provide the doorway for students to enter broader concepts. New information yields new opinions and thoughts. This is not being “weak-minded’ or “soft;” changing opinions is at the heart of learning and discovery.

- **Resist over-simplified or “tidy” solutions.** With good intentions, we may try to soften the blow of hard conversations or seek simple shallow solutions or summaries. This is not helpful.

BECOMING “THEY”

As educators, we can and must find ways to ensure all of our students are empowered, authorized and expected to envision and construct their own futures, in classrooms and beyond, every single day. We have the power and urgent responsibility to help students to name and feed their strengths, develop habits of inquiry, learn to forge action plans, push through assumptions, question group-think and defy any learned sense of helplessness.

We must see our students as the agents of change that “they” are, and act accordingly, within and outside of classrooms. This is where real change will happen. By “hacking the systems of power” (in the words of Theaster Gates) we equip young people to be informed, active agents who can choose how they want to be involved, and what decisions they want to participate in. Like the diverse experiences of the characters in *No Small Plans*, these kinds of conversations equip young people to “wrestle with what it will take to design the city they want, need and deserve.”

In this process we continue our own work as learners and community members; we ourselves participate in determining powerful truths, posing and exploring pertinent questions. Let us trust ourselves, our students, and the power of essential, cogent, challenging and meaningful questions which disrupt the artificial tranquility of silence, denial or acceptance of the status quo.