

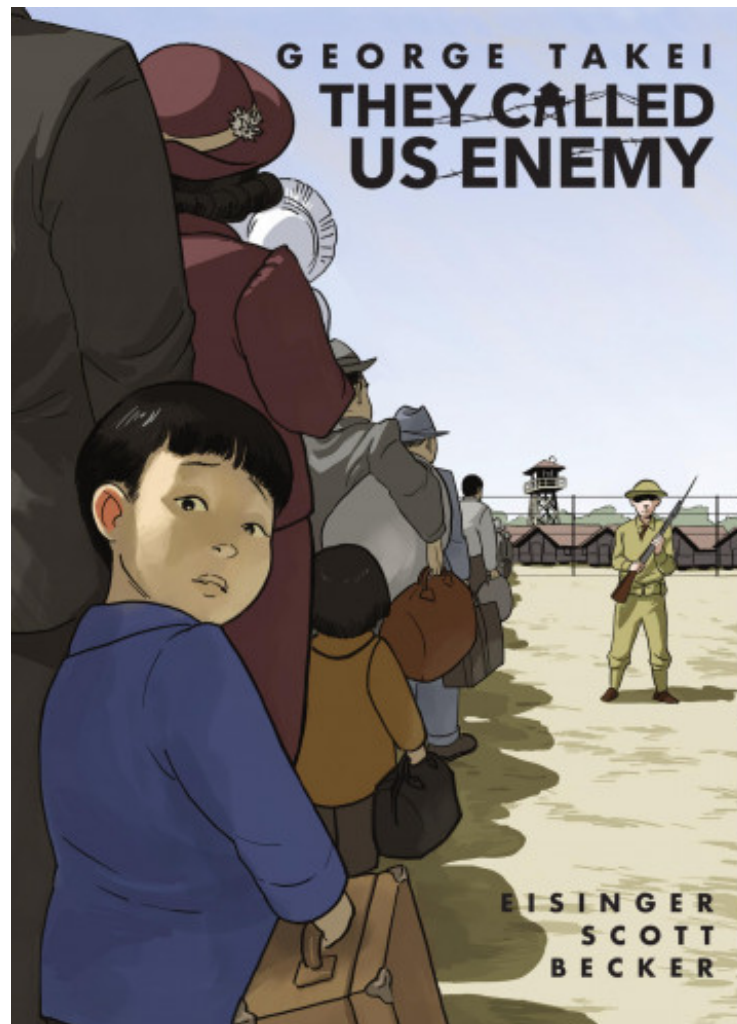
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Note

They Called Us Enemy: Offering Possibilities for Teachers to Problematize Their Assumptions About Students and Parents

by Abby C. Emerson



While teaching a class titled Multicultural Approaches to Teaching Young Children for both pre-service and in-service teachers, we read George Takei's (2019) text *They Called Us Enemy*. This powerful graphic novel provides Takei's autobiographical account of living in the United States' internment camps or "relocation centers" for people of Japanese descent. The powerful imagery and dialogue demonstrate his lived experiences in the centers, from the minute details about curtains and food to larger themes such as what resistance can or should look like.

This was my first time teaching this course at Teachers College, Columbia University and I wondered how to make this text that was so rich in narrative history relevant to the classroom teaching of early childhood educators. The 14 educators I had the privilege of working with were a diverse mix of racial identifications, ethnicities, nationalities, and ages. Some of them were three months out of college and some had been teaching for many years. We read this text during the week where the theme was Transnational Identities, Multicultural Classrooms: Immigration, Race, and Dehumanization. I started our time together with an activity called Circle of Voices, that comes from Indigenous cultures, as a way to allow everyone an opportunity to share their thoughts (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). In this activity, I first shared an assumption or mindset common in school settings: *Some parents care more about education than others*. By offering this statement forward for analysis, I sought to give students an opportunity to make connections between that mindset, Takei's text, and the students they would or did have in their classrooms.

For the activity, everyone had two minutes to silently think and jot notes about those possible connections. Following that thinking time, in Zoom breakout rooms (this course took place virtually during Covid-19), students took turns speaking about the provided assumption and text for one minute uninterrupted. After everyone had a chance to speak in their small groups, they then had an open small group discussion where they responded directly to what others said. I encouraged them to disagree, ask questions, notice similarities or differences, and make connections to other course readings.

We came back together for our whole group conversation and a few key themes emerged. The first theme revealed that they were questioning unfair assumptions teachers make about students and their families. The teachers discussed that caring for children in circumstances made challenging by systemic racism can look different from the stereotypical white norm that many teachers hold. They contemplated different forms of resistance that parents might have to engage in because of institutional structures inside and outside the school building, from Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings to immigration policies. Just as in the text Takei had to trouble how he narrowly conceptualized fighting back against oppression, the teachers had to trouble how they

narrowly conceptualized parenting, especially parenting done by parents marginalized in big and small ways in a society mired in racism. The teachers wondered if some parents have to resist more than they realized.

The second big theme was regarding media consumption and gathering enough information to have the "whole picture." They questioned narratives they had been taught in school and that they learned through various forms of media. The teachers discussed the importance of seeking out counternarratives like Takei's that would disrupt the problematic stereotypes they hold of parents from diverse backgrounds. A preservice teacher starting her teaching career reflected in her final paper:

When I read, *They Called Us Enemy* (Takei, 2019) I was shocked to find out the United States had placed hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans in concentration camps. I had been taught about the Pearl Harbor event, but I never knew about any of the events that occurred after this. I really questioned why I had never heard about this huge injustice in any history course I took both in high school and in college. Reading these books made me realize how the education I have received growing up was a very white-washed version of history. As an educator, it is my job to not only teach my students the real story about what happened in the past and is still happening today, but to also continue to better educate myself about these false realities I have always thought to be true. I plan to engage with a variety of materials that help me to learn about the real stories and the true history of the United States.

On the whole, Takei's text offers a wealth of possibilities. Older students could read it alongside more traditional historical texts. Younger students could do shared readings of a few key pages to understand the history of dehumanization in our country. Or even, as I have offered here, teachers could use it as a way to problematize the assumptions they hold about students and parents.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully thank Dr. Mariana Souto-Manning for building such a rich syllabus for me to work with in the course mentioned above.

References

- Brookfield, S. & Preskill, S. (2005). *Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for Democratic classrooms*. Jossey-Bass.
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