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The Teacher's Work and a Little Good Trouble in Arizona

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Abstract

This paper is an autoethnographic account of one action to use civil disobedience as a reliable method for protest, and also a discussion of the way such actions, while they are in some sense ordinary protest seeking reform, have revolutionary implications for long term structural change. At the same time, it takes the form of an educator's memoir essay, recalling the importance of solidarity and the cooperative work of human rights and education. The art and craft of teaching is intimately connected to the public's right to schooling in the service of constitutional ideals, in the hope that through free, fair public education, citizens can maintain their right to speak, act, and organize for democratic life.

Keywords: *Autoethnographic study, John Lewis Voting Rights Law, teaching work.*

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Introduction

Voting rights, and the right to both vote and have the results of that vote recognized, are in crisis in the U.S. This is a story of one moment in the resistance to that tendency. It begins in 2021, when an important proposed law to guarantee those rights, was blocked by an Arizona U.S. Senator, Karen Sinema, a Democrat, who many educators supported for election. This law, if passed, would prevent states from drawing new voting districts to isolate African American and other marginalized groups, under the control of white voting blocs. Her refusal was a passive-aggressive assault on voting rights in the U.S. and policies that encourage fair and open elections. (Human Rights Campaign, 2025) John Lewis first used the term, *good trouble* during protests during the U.S. Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, and has become a rallying cry for the resistance to the breakdown in voting rights that has emerged in recent years in the U.S. (Brookings, 2025)

Through local Tucson groups we learned that Arizona based organizer Kai Newkirk had worked on this event where veteran elder leaders of the legendary *Poor People's Campaign* (PPC) would first speak at a park rally and then march and lead a sit-down protest on the balcony at Senator Sinema's office.¹ The Reverend Jesse Jackson, Rev. William Barber, and Barbara Arnwine, were those veterans. These actions came in the spirit and example of John Lewis, "Good Trouble" for the sake of justice denied.

At the end of that march would come a planned act of peaceful civil disobedience done by about thirty citizens. They would sit down on a balcony outside her office, which she had rented in a private building, until warned and finally arrested, processed into the system for eventual trial.

That hot humid morning at the rally before the march we learned from the speaker that Rev. Jackson had come directly here on a flight from Paris, after just the day before, the French government had awarded him membership, and its highest praise for citizens

¹ My wife Jamie and I agreed to drive up to Phoenix to support a circle around the social action network: the *Salt of the Earth Labor College* and *Tucson Jobs With Justice*.

of the world, in *The Legion of Honor*. The crowd went silent as we heard his powerful, legendary voice, now in a whisper. Despite the ravages of Parkinson disease, he spoke, and you could see it in his hands, for they shook. Somehow, its whisper made it stronger. It was getting hotter, near 38 degrees, cloudless, and humid that day. As he spoke, I could almost hear the handheld fans flutter as listeners cooled their faces in the rally crowd. His speech included that reminder from Martin Luther King, to have hope in the darkest times... “The arc of freedom is long, but it bends toward justice.” Then as the rally ended, cheers went up, and we began the long march to the sit-in site.

That summer and that day I was in full awareness of the experience and privilege beginning in 2014 working with public education professionals, and a community of critical educators in Ankara, Türkiye. During my visits to Ankara, I was given such grace, support and welcome. The images of friends, work, schools, cafés, homes, life are part of me now. That day, I felt their presence.

The U.S. and Turkish public appetite for the truth is largely shaped in schools. And while it might be a long way between the life of say, an Arizona, or any U.S. schoolteacher and the geopolitics of U.S. Turkish relations, even before the Turkish independence revolution of 1923 the West and the U.S. has had an impact on Turkish education. John Dewey's consultancies to Türkiye before WWII, worked to help inform both public education and influence the democratic, progressive Village Institutes, for example. (Sozer, 2013)

The public-school civil servants in both the U.S. and Türkiye are supported by a remarkably similar social contract. It is one with a fundamental constitutional base. Both institutions are there as a foundation of an ideal, participatory democratic life, a life which rejects the authority of a sultan or a king to direct the lives of subjects. In both countries lives a passion for citizenship, and a rejection of servitude, and the public elementary, secondary and higher education archipelago is where this passion is either stoked, or banked, or extinguished. During my time in Ankara, I developed; understanding on a deeper level what teachers and educators do, is labor. Despite the covering of prestige and institutional membership, we are public workers. I went to Türkiye with progressive

sympathies. That transformed. I knew that education, teaching, mentoring, writing, studying, planning, was a job. We work, for the public, with an eye on their highest ideals first, contending with their political realities on the path to the realization: that “arc” justice.

The Balcony

Watching the Reverend Jackson walk haltingly to the stairs to the Senator’s office balcony for the sit-in was both emotional and surreal. People were pushing and becoming agitated. There was a crowd pulsing around him, and he was in a tight ring of his security detail. This included the group who were to go on the office balcony for the protest. They had identical brown vests on. In the crush, I saw several of them turn and go around a corner, leaving. Their numbers reduced, an organizer shouted, “Who’s going with the arrest group?” I decided to go, raised my hand and went, but I admit it was an impulse. I was influenced by the emotion of the scene, and worried that more would get “cold feet” and leave. In school I had the habit of raising my hand in class whether I was ready or not, and here I went again.

The balcony where we sat, outside Sinema’s office, bore an eerie resemblance to the balcony at the *Lorraine Motel* in Memphis. I think of the famous photo with Reverend Jackson, Ralph Abernathy, and Andrew Young standing over Dr. King’s body, on the day of his assassination, April 4, 1968. I was a nervous on the walk up there, for I had little experience with this kind of “direct action.” I knew I’d see the inside of a police car and headquarters that day, and maybe a night in lockup. I kept myself going thinking about how frightened the African America children were, the *Little Rock Nine* as they faced that vicious crowd in 1959, screaming, threatening them in front of the school as they entered, keeping heads held high.

The hours on that balcony, with the elders’ speeches, songs and nerves, is a story in itself. Finally, the police came, starting to round us up. I heard Rev. Jackson say impatiently to one, “Just put the cuffs on!” We were marched to police cars and with sirens screaming, we sped along toward the jail at breakneck speed,... indeed. Deferring to my age, I was zip tied in front of me. The boy in the car with me, an African American student

who had come all the way from Newark, New Jersey, was cuffed behind his back. There were no seatbelts, so if we had hit another car I'd have a chance to raise my arms, but he could crack his skull against the bulletproof window separating us from the front seat.

We were processed, which took a couple of hours and charged with third-degree misdemeanor trespass, which in Arizona carries a maximum punishment of a 500-dollar fine, or 30 days in jail. The organizers for the group, had arranged with the State prosecutors, for the group to be offered a "diversion" plea bargain, where they would be given the chance to work out punishment in community service hours. We were told by the lawyers working pro-bono (free) for the Campaign that by taking the diversion plea, we could avoid having a criminal charge on our records. I was feeling that ghost Hypocrisy, breathing down my neck: made my living,...45 years teaching about how paying the full civil price of principled disobedience made our schools and society freer. And now when it came to me, I was going to avoid the penalty? It was paying the penalty that taught something, not the performance. I decided to argue my case and enter this plea of not guilty and respectfully accept whatever the court decides.

My job has been a little part of the world democratic project to build minds furnished with the capacity to know, and the character to speak for justice under pressure. Learning to speak at a political, community, or union meeting; to speak, to volunteer, and yes, to vote. I earned a decent living honored and entrusted by the public, to help young people learn this language. My career path has introduced me to the histories and presence of the millions around the world, engaged in a fight for justice, and fair education, in places where less than a generation ago, schooling and that participatory act, the question, the raised hand, was impossible. Schools were shut to the underclasses, education devoted to royal, and religious service.

In struggle after struggle, the long reach of injustice was pried open and held open under pressure, to realize the human right to an education for every person. These struggles were just little daily gains, and also, monumental, where schools were battlefields, and real blood was spilled to open classes for a democratic life worth the name, as in the South during the Sixties.

So many gave lives, or their own freedom, to open free schools, for all. The blood of Medgar Evers, James Meredith, killed for seeking education, pertain to this battleground, apropos to this fight for civil voting freedoms now under renewed attack. Also, the tears of those who mourn the exclusion and inequality that plagues our schools, while we now in 2025 suffer a plague of another kind. This is not the space, nor enough space to discuss how far “away from goodness” we have come as constitutional rights are violated in the name of “national security.”

Blood on the Floor

A Critical Pedagogy audience such as this one will be interested in the way Marx, a hundred and fifty years ago, would value the development of constitution-making in France, and also Germany. The rights of the citizen, to speech, meeting, the press, and free public education were to him, revolutionary. I smile to myself remembering that day, with Rev. Jackson coming to protest, from France, where this latest expression of national Constitutional government saw fit to invite his honorary membership.

Marx and Lenin both gave importance to the work of those who participate in democratic (parliamentary) politics, and the working peoples' movements, the unions. In 1920 Lenin criticizes academic “purist” leftists, who scoff at involvement with the electoral process. (Lenin, n.d. p. 243)

Marx had written directly to this point much earlier, where in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* he analyzed the mid-nineteenth century constitutional revisions of France and also Germany before the Napoleonic Era. (Marx, 1994) There he stated the importance of such constitutional guarantees as the “the liberties of the (French constitution of) 1848, personal liberty, liberty of the press, speech, of association, of free public education and religious freedom.” He wrote that these, “received a constitutional ‘uniform’ which made them invulnerable.” For each of these liberties is proclaimed as the absolute right of the French citizen.” (Marx, 1994, p. 244)

They were necessary for revolutionary change, but sadly not enough. Because the sovereign could refuse to enforce their exercise. The sitting sovereign, using the defense

of “state security” could refuse to enforce the laws connected to the constitution, and even participate in their active violation.

Breaking the Ice

Since 2022, the freedom to teach has been distorted violently in the U.S. Today just telling the truth about our race and class history in a school in Arizona is unlawful. To teach these true stories is a crime. For example, any teacher in the employ of Arizona state government, teaching truths about the struggle for voting rights, might be fired, or fined and have to go to court, for this country has now normalized a racist smear, where a word of praise, to be termed “woke” an African-American recognition of personal enlightenment, is used to indict teachers, curriculum, schools that just teach history, and literature telling These.

Now in truth much of this is performative, but nationwide “advance compliance” through intimidation has weakened some teachers resolve. Still, many teachers and schools refuse to comply, but do so with courage, knowing that a price could be paid. Reason and the truths of science, and history are victims of partisan attacks. Beyond schooling, but including the human rights of children, the current immigration “dragnets” daily violate the civil rights of both citizens and residents, which are constitutionally protected. Parents and children have been separated, and both now housed by the tens of thousands in detention with no rights to a lawyer, waiting for deportation to what can only be termed concentration camps, again, without due process of law, for state “security.”

That time we spent in solidarity with the veteran freedom fighters for the right to vote, almost seems quaint now. For we watch as the laws we and our ancestors’ representatives passed, are treated with scorn. In a related case which caught my eye, a Turkish doctoral student of *Child Development*, studying at Boston’s *Tufts University* became a target, when on national TV the video showing the secret police of ICE, (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) were shown accosting her, questioning and then dragging her into an unmarked vehicle. They were masked, in street clothes and bulletproof vests.

She reminded me of many students I had met. Many followed her case and advocated in effort to get her an attorney, The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) filed its own *Amicus Curiae* (Friend of the Court) brief. (AAUP, 2025) Finally, after months she was released to Vermont. She was extraordinarily courageous throughout, as she fought life-threatening bouts of asthma over and over in the hot humid Louisiana camp. And still, she emerged determined to have her rights, refusing to choose deportation. She was a legal visiting scholar/student and determined to finish her doctorate. As of this writing, she is doing just that.

I had seen that kind of “gritty” citizenship in many of the scholars and students in Ankara. She knew her rights and determined to fight for them. Her crime? She had simply co-authored an article in the Tufts student newspaper, with a critique of the violent extermination of Palestinians, including tens of thousands of children by the Israeli government. Like thousands of other students protesting here, she was following the Constitution. Her story of courage merits much more than I can provide in this space. I bring it to this article partly to show how far we are from my small issue in 2021. I was just in line with how many, who have used the custom and model of civil disobedience to demonstrate a civic problem. Ozturk’s case, now like so many, reflects a government choosing to brazenly ignore our Constitution. And we have tens of thousands of persons deprived of their freedom, with no access to legal protection. They occupy a chain of camps, really, filling faster than these deportees can be processed.

I feel almost embarrassed here, moving from the enormity of what we are witnessing to an “academic” point. I note here, that so many years later, Marx was correct. The U.S. Constitution is necessary but it made of words on paper. Under enough pressure its “bend toward justice” stops. Why necessary? Thousands of court cases proceed today, and many succeed, freeing such plaintiffs as Ms. Ozturk. Each one is on the record as evidence, a success where freedom to learn, and speak matters for any resident. Advocacy, the legal process, force us to evaluate our Constitution. If it is weak, if it means nothing, the state itself loses its honor, its claim to be a nation of laws. For Marx, his science would

point beyond bourgeois freedom, but working-class emancipation would never be possible without dialectic struggle through the Rights of “Man.”

I think back to one night class at Northern Arizona University in about 2012. I taught the story of Paul Geheeb, a German school manager and teacher, who risked his life hiding Jewish students in 1943, as armed Gestapo rummaged through his class lists, looking for Jewish names. I recall my students: sure, they were tired after a long day, and uneasy hearing this dark story, and then when they started to rush early out for snacks before our break, I was angry and then warned them not to slip on that blood on the floor, which made their public-school room possible, and safe. I could then barely imagine then that secret police would be stalking school grounds in our cities and towns, hunting for children in 2025.

This attack on the right to vote is also aimed at the heart of children, who depend on fair laws and just government. It is not the filibuster issue in isolation but a constellation of injustices that threaten democracy. And these are exactly the lessons needed for the public to understand the way racism has blocked and is now, still crippling the right to vote.

The Letters

Following my arrest in 2021 I got a lawyer and waited for my hearing. I began drafting a letter for my day in court, one that would explain my actions. This is an excerpt:

As you know, Your Honor, here in Arizona, the state where I have worked and lived longest, we teachers face long odds, but we build anyway, minds capable of making and amending our laws, and then voting.

My mentors and best teachers taught me the importance of the voices of ancestors, suffocated by oppression who fought to have an education, to paraphrase Aristotle, worthy of a free people. I've done what I could to shed light on this problem and illuminate issues that affected my students and their own students.

So many required curricula require that teachers emphasize good citizenship, including consistent encouragement to participate in the political process. Every school, including primary and elementary schools, have student councils. They are designed to

develop a taste for representative democracy. Wherever there is a public classroom, children are developing their language skills. Not just the language of the nation, but that "language of freedom." This is a literacy that prepares democracy for the next generation, a literacy that includes the ability to comprehend the language of policy, lawmaking. Why have public schools at all if we don't protect our democratic rights to exercise the skills learned there? What hypocrisy for us to hold students accountable for these skills and then deny citizens the right to have their representatives hold hearings, and have a vote, on yes... Voting Rights! I know my going to trial on this doesn't amount to much on the huge world stage of time. But I've come to believe that it's my job. And part of an oath we all take to protect and defend the Constitution. I hope Your Honor and this court may see my reasoning.

I was called to appear four times, each time something would prevent a hearing. Each time we made the long journey I thought that it would be the trial date. On each visit I'd assume I would get hearing, and rehearse some part my letter: *"Your honor, yes, I am a teacher, and a professor, a teacher of teachers, and there is no curriculum I can find in Arizona where the public tells me **not** to tell children to care about the Constitution. They must salute a flag that represents the ideals of our democratic revolution daily. Those ideals mean nothing without honest politics and a fair vote. We all must be able to vote fairly and until then we are the ones corrupting our youth, so I cannot tell them one thing in class and ignore it as a citizen. I know for sure that the public which supports this court, and our school, do not want its officers and leaders to lie every day. Yes, I broke a law not to trespass on private property, but that property is rented by our Senator, a public official. It is a bigger crime to prevent a Senate vote, especially when that vote is about the right to vote! That is guilt. Me? Not guilty, your honor."*

Finally, in mid-July 2022, the prosecutor, and the judge started talking privately in front. The witnesses for the police stood up. Would this be the day for the hearing and the decision? I had my letter in my hand.

For me, however, there was another letter, more important than the one I wrote. Now, in November 2021 before my July trial, I had received a letter from a friend and

colleague. It was a special act of organization and solidarity that I'll never forget. Colleagues, and students in Ankara had convened a group to sponsor a professional character reference, an Amicus Curiae: "Friend of the Court" letter. In it they vouched for my efforts in Ankara, that I had supported their work, and shared their dream of a fine public education, one that Dewey once argued was "that every wise parent, every good community wants for their own children," across the world. (Dewey, 1916) Dewey would make his mark in work with education leaders in Türkiye. I know that Türkiye made its mark on me, and this letter was one. My lawyer had submitted to the judge and prosecution it right after we got it.

As I stood with my lawyer, along with other evidence, and paperwork on the state prosecutor's table, I could clearly see a copy of that letter on the desk of the prosecutor. I saw it not because of the text, but because of the column that was visible below the letter the list of supporting signatures. I can't say for certain, but I believe, as does my attorney, that this one from citizen educators of Türkiye was a real factor in the outcome. My lawyer said he thought this letter from academics in Türkiye, had real impact.

Then we saw the prosecutor gathered his files, including that letter, and walked to the bench, and he and the judge talked. It seemed like twenty minutes but likely it was twenty seconds. Then the judge asked the prosecutor to formally state his case. After nearly a year and a half he just said, "Your honor, The state rests its case. We file for a motion to dismiss the defendant."

"Motion approved," and the gavel came down. I tried speaking, though my lawyer tried to stop me, saying. "We won! Sit down!" But I shouted, "Your honor, may I please read a statement into the court record?" ... "Mr. Senese, I am sure you have strong feelings about this issue, but the case is closed. I will take your written statement, but no further discussion is necessary. Have a safe trip home." I walked up and handed the clerk my letter. And that was that.

That was some drama, but over the years I just looked for decent work to help schools and the idea of democracy in education. As a great friend and democratic educator in Ankara, I would say: It was my job.

I'll close with my first real memory after jetlag wore off and I started to work at Ankara University. After we walked out of the elevator our host invited Jamie and I for coffee. As we waited for it, he saw a copy of a book and handed it to me. I would come to see the way so many coffee shops in Türkiye are like small libraries. It was a book of poetry by Nazim Hikmet. It struck me then and still does, along with a poem in which I came to value, *The Great Humanity*, which is almost light, and full of that special tonic, a music of hope. Hope is a constant theme in his writing, hope in the hardest of circumstances. I've also learned another one that has the tones of solidity, and a furious sadness: *A Sad State of Freedom*, which seems more apt right now in this current reaction faced by so many. Right now, in my country, freedom for the working class is indeed, a "sad affair under the stars." I put copy of that book on the air conditioner at our labor college, along with a photo of Nazim, raising a defiant fist walking out of a jail. This essay is about freedom, all those promised by our constitutions, about truth and lies that impersonate truth.

You're the Indians Now

In the early 1990s a Native American freedom fighter, John Trudell, was prophetic in a talk, and I remember him mocking students at my university then near Chicago, who he said had come to see a stranger, and an exotic one. Then, he proceeded not to talk about his experience; he talked about theirs and started asking them questions. He marched up and down the stage and peppered the crowd with queries, asking for a show of hands if they had the following problems....he asked about their growing poverty, their growing precarious employment, their dependence on parents working two jobs just to get by, their credit card debt, the growing tuition, etc. as neoliberalism began eating away at their middle class. So many hands went up. And the crowd finally went silent. Then he said quietly, laughing a little into the microphone, "Yep, you folks came to see an Indian.... Well, I did too! because you're the Indians now," and walked off the stage.

Trudell is gone now too, but despite his own suffering despair, (he had lost his wife and children in a house fire set by enemies of his work to free his people in the American Indian Movement.) he came and spoke those words. He turned his mourning into organizing, teaching, and writing. I can't forget what we do in this profession: we promise to make words possible. That's all, words, now said under more pressure. That's enough.

Since 2017 another phrase has been revived in the movements here in the U.S.. Another ghost of freedom here, singer, songwriter and organizer Joe Hill wrote from his jail in 1915 to a fellow labor leader on the outside, as he waited for his own execution date, arrested and convicted for his work with the IWW *International Workers of the World*, the “Wobblies” and their idea of a just world in solidarity and “*One Big Union*.” “Tell everybody not to mourn me, Bill. Go organize.” That's the work, for education, teachers, united mind workers. With all the pressure now, and great it is, whatever is possible matters, and when there is a chance it matters, in solidarity, and this paper tried to point in that direction; to a reminder of challenging times when resistance was met with what seemed like impossible force. Lewis's *Good Trouble* made a difference in the heart of the Civil Rights struggle, and in this time of reaction, It's still does, in cities like Los Angeles, and Chicago, where resistance is making a difference against injustice, where teachers refuse to cooperate, to “give up” kids, and their families. And its reminder for me anyway, also Joe Hill's words from that cell, “Don't mourn, organize,” with a little *Good Trouble* maybe, and a little hope.

References and Notes

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Lenin also wrote of the importance of literacy, and literate communication, and democratic social action, in labor stirred by writers, and books: *"This being an explanation for the peasants of what the Social Democrats want. One. The struggle of the workers in the towns many peasants must have heard now of the labor disturbances in the towns. Some of them have lived in Saint Petersburg or Moscow and worked in the factories and seen the "riots," as the police call them.... Others again must have seen the leaflets issued by the workers or the books about workers' struggle.... At first it was only the students who rebelled, but now thousands and tens of thousands of workers have risen in all the larger towns. In most cases their fight is against their employers, against the manufacturers, against the capitalists. The workers declare strikes, all the workers at the factory stop work at the same time, demanding higher wages and demanding that instead of being made to work 11 or 10 hours a day they should work no more than eight hours."* p. 246.

In an interesting aside, Lenin remarks on pre-revolutionary Türkiye. *"The associations of the workers which fight for this better society are called Social Democratic parties. In almost every country, except Russia and Türkiye, there is such a party which exists openly.... The government persecutes the party, but the party exists in secret in spite of all prohibitions; It publishes newspapers, books, and organizes secret societies. The workers not only meet in secret, but they also come out into the streets and crowds, they unfurl their banners bearing the inscriptions: Long live the 8-hour day! Long live freedom, long lived socialism! The government savagely persecutes the workers for this. But the workers do not surrender they continue the fight."* P. 244 *"Only in Türkiye and in Russia are the people still politically the slaves of the sultan's government and of the government of the autocratic czar."* p.246-7.

See also his, *Left-wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, for the importance of civil freedom, social movement action, and moving beyond mere radical rhetoric.

Human Rights Campaign. HRC, 2025. | *John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act*.
<https://www.hrc.org/resources/voting-rights-advancement-act>

The John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act of 2025 (H.R. 14) is proposed voting rights legislation named after civil rights activist John Lewis. The bill would restore and strengthen parts of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, most notably its requirement for states and jurisdictions with a history of voting rights violations to seek federal approval before enacting certain changes to their voting laws.^[1] The bill was written in response to the Supreme Court decision in *Shelby County v. Holder* in 2013, which struck down the formula that was used to determine which jurisdictions were subject to that requirement. 29-30.

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About the Author

Guy Senese is Professor Emeritus in Social Foundations of Education at Northern Arizona University and Faculty Adjunct at Pima Community College where he teaches Critical Sociology. A native of Chicago, Dr. Senese drew inspiration from that city's labor history to help found and organize the growth of what is now a statewide union for university teachers and knowledge workers in Arizona. He taught History at Rough Rock High School on the Navajo Nation, studied History and Philosophy of Education at the University of Illinois and in 1991, led by mentor the late Richard Brosio, Dr. Senese did post-doctoral study in Critical Pedagogy, Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School. As guest of the faculty and students at the College of Education Sciences at Ankara University, he was 2014-15 Fulbright Teaching and Research Fellow. Along with several books in education policy, Dr. Senese is co-author of a critical history of American education, *School and Society*, now in its 8th edition. He has continued study in Turkish Education policy foundations and was 2018 Faculty Teaching Associate in the Foreign Language Teaching Department at Middle East Technical University. With Dr. Fatma Mızıkacı, Yasemin Cakcak-Tezgiden and Sharon Gorman, he co-edited *The Language of Freedom and Teacher's Authority: Case Comparisons from Turkey and the US*. Dr. Senese has spoken to audiences of Turkish scholars on Dewey's mixed legacy and impact on Turkish education, most recently in Spring of 2024, at Düzce University. He lives in Tucson, Arizona.

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