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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *The Responsive Writing Teacher, Grades K-5* by Melanie Meehan and Kelsey Sorum.

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Foreword

Everything exists in a specific context. Understanding the environment that produced a thing is critical to the understanding of that thing.

So, it is important to note that this book is emerging as we make sense of a pandemic,

While Black life is being extinguished by the state. And debated in public. And affirmed in the streets,

While there are children in cages at the border and in substandard housing across town and in crumbling schools across the tracks,

While there are “nice” people with “good” intentions whose ignorance allowed them to look the other way when policy makers voted for it to be that way,

While there are “powerful” people whose self-interest inspires them to work at keeping it that way,

While the world watches American democracy stumble over its own hubris,

While the earth itself responds to our collective failure to be good stewards of the environment with fire and superstorms and lead in the water of our most vulnerable children.

Our. Children.

We are raising them to be thoughtful, perceptive, and literate, so they see all of this. And they question us, because they are children—born truth seekers. And we have met their quest for truth with mythology disguised as education or by burying our heads in the sand altogether.

This is the real danger of our contemporary moment—that we might be raising a generation unable to grapple with the challenges that we have perpetuated ... because we are too cowardly to tell the truth, to teach the truth, and to respond to the truth.

Enlightenment thinking suggests that it is what we do in these difficult moments that will define us.

Conversely, folk wisdom sees plainly and presents a more observational truth. This historical moment has already defined us. We are a nation of bystanders.

We see injustice. We clutch pearls. We tweet. And then we sip coffee while CNN and Fox News compete for the opportunity to tell us what to do next. This is a failure of literacy. And of empathy. And, potentially, of humanity.

I am not okay with this. Neither are Melanie and Kelsey.

How we respond to what the world hands us is a lesson that resonates louder than anything that we could convey through virtual teaching or in a classroom. Our responses matter profoundly, and in this work, there is nothing more sacred than how we respond to children.

Melanie and Kelsey understand this.

They understand that being responsive to children is not platitudes or empty declarations of belief. Being responsive is work.

It is having the imagination to see beyond the status quo and the temerity to challenge it. It is the understanding that when it comes to meeting the varied needs of our children, we can work to abandon yesterday's thinking if it does not serve today's needs.

Being responsive is working to outgrow our own ideas about who children are and what they need. It is acting on the reality that reflection and introspection are impotent if they are not matched with real and sustainable ways to develop our content knowledge, grow our classroom pedagogy, and decolonize our school policy.

People often implore me to be "hopeful" for these kinds of changes.

I have studied with Melanie and Kelsey, and they remind us that hope alone is not a viable strategy for change. Hope without action is the expectation that the answers to the things that challenge us will materialize out of thin air if we simply don a positive attitude and wait. This magical thinking robs us of our agency and allows us to sidestep our responsibility to create better realities for children.

Instead, Melanie and Kelsey recontextualize hope as the catalyzing part of an active process. Hope is most powerful when it exists in relationship to careful study, collective work, thoughtful reflection, and a commitment to trying again when things do not go as planned. THIS is the recipe for the kind of human-centered transformation that we need for ourselves and for our institutions.

Melanie and Kelsey's belief in children and in their communities informs their methodology. Their outrage at injustice fuels how they confront their own thinking. Their sadness about all that we have lost has fueled purposeful teaching and deliberate engagement in a time when we need it desperately.

There are those who simply dream of a better world. And then there are those who work toward it. Melanie and Kelsey dream, AND they do the work. This book is an instructive call to action for all of us who need to be reminded of what hope enacted as classroom practice can look like.

—Cornelius Minor

Brooklyn-based dad, educator, and author of

We Got This: Equity, Access, and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be