



Deprogramming Indiana Jones: Anti-Colonialist DMing with Kids

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Abstract

How do we get children to move beyond the colonialist version of fantasy adventure to form a less self-centered and more nuanced version of what it means to be a hero? This article explores pressures on young Dungeons & Dragons players, urging Dungeon Masters (DMs) to foster empathy, cooperation, and critical thinking. By examining problematic tropes like “evil” races and antagonist cultures, the article highlights how these elements reflect colonialist ideology. Through anti-colonialist strategies – such as diverse narratives, respect-based norms, and safety tools like the “X card” – DMs can create games that emphasize moral complexity, helping players become empathetic individuals ready to challenge real-world inequalities.

Keywords: anti-colonialism, middle schoolers, mindful DMing, safety tools

要約

どのようにして子どもたちが、植民地主義的なファンタジー冒険の枠を超え、自己中心的でない、より繊細なヒーロー像を形成するように導くことができるだろうか。本論文は、ダンジョンズ&ドラゴンズ (D&D) の若年プレイヤーが直面する課題を探り、ダンジョンマスター (DM) が共感、協力、批判的思考を育む必要性を訴えるものである。特に「邪悪な」種族や対立的な文化といった問題のあるトロープを検討することで、こうした要素が植民地主義的イデオロギーを反映していることを明らかにする。多様な物語、尊重を基盤とする規範、「Xカード」といった安全ツールを通じて、DM は道徳的な複雑さを強調するゲーム体験を提供できる。これにより、プレイヤーは共感力を高め、現実世界の不平等に挑む準備を整えた思いやりのある個人に成長することが期待される。

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1. Introduction: The Indiana Jones Problem in American Culture

Over 40 years ago, the movie *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg 1981) seared itself into the imaginations of a generation of people, beginning with the opening scene. Indiana Jones, intrepid American archeologist, steals a golden idol from a primitive-yet-deadly temple. This triggers a series of traps – arrows, pits, a descending doorway, the betrayal of a traitorous assistant, and finally culminating in one of the most memorable moments in action cinema – a giant rolling stone ball, following Jones as he desperately tries to escape.

This opening scene seems straight out of a *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) campaign (Gygax and Arneson 1974) – complete with low dexterity saves while the player character (PC) is trying to escape the

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Received: 1 April 2024

Accepted: 24 September 2024

Published: 23 November 2024

Reviewing editor: Michael Freudenthal,
University Sorbonne Paris Nord

Citation: Cullinan, Maryanne. 2024. “Deprogramming Indiana Jones: Anti-Colonialist DMing with Kids.” *Japanese Journal of Analog Role-Playing Game Studies*, 5: 28e-36e.

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pit, and a traitorous non-player character's (NPC) sudden demise at the hands of a spear trap. What child wouldn't want to be Indiana Jones? Stealing treasure, fighting bad guys, exploding temples, and living in a world where actions have no lasting impact past what occurs on screen. If an event no longer affects the main character, we never have to think about it again.

This, of course, assumes that Indiana Jones is the main character. The movie does not explain why the local guide betrays him, beyond just "being bad." How does the native population feel about Jones destroying their ancient temple and stealing their historic treasure? From their perspective, Jones is the thief who should be apprehended to return their antique religious statuary. Sorry Indiana Jones, but do antiquities of other cultures always "belong in a museum?" Why is it up to Jones to decide? What happens to the people left behind?

Colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people by another (Kohn and Reddy 2024). American children who play D&D have been surrounded by colonialism and the trope of the white savior in popular culture their entire lives (Vera and Gordon 2003). Much of the American History taught in schools is notoriously colonialist and Eurocentric, while ignoring the positive impacts of ethnic studies on engagement and academic performance (Sleeter and Zavala 2020). As a middle school educator, it is vitally important that the learning that students do in my classroom is not just a collection of facts and figures. I must encourage a way of critically thinking about the world around them that allows them to care about the other people in it.

Nel Noddings published her book *Caring* (1986). It became the basis for a school of moral philosophy that posits that moral behaviors come from the memory of caring for others and being cared for. Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TRPG) give us the ability to care and be cared for in fictional, collective settings that we have had a hand in building. As Noddings and Brooks said, "We want students to recognize the wrongdoings of their own country or group, but we also want them to see the best in their various traditions and find hope in the work of restoring, maintaining, and extending that best" (Noddings and Brooks 2017, 2-3).

Although D&D 5th edition (5e) was based on war gaming, and has rules or mechanics that openly value killing creatures to get experience points (Campbell, Cassada, and Rea 2014, 82) is this really what we want to teach the next generation of players? Why do we want to privilege violence over other solutions? Playing role-playing games with children gives an opportunity to help them experience adventure and danger while decentering themselves and becoming more morally aware of others around them (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020).

Anti-colonialism can be broadly defined as a theoretical framework, analytical tool, and grounded, place-based practice oriented toward resisting, fighting against, and dismantling the aims of colonial regimes, systems, and ideologies. We can use RPGs experiences to help students explore this and the questions that Noddings puts at the center of moral independence: "To what degree am I responsible for my own acts? To what extent am I responsible for things others do as a result of how I've treated them?" (Libresco 2018). What happens when we look at stories from a more caring, non-colonial point of view instead of the wanton destruction and wealth accumulation common in Western stories of exploration and adventure?

2. A History of Problematic Tropes in Western Fantasy and D&D

European fantasy settings and RPGs have a history of problematic relationships with race, non-Western culture and general misogyny. Although Orcs may originate in Irish folklore (Sims-Williams 2011) our current American understanding of orcs is deeply rooted in the *Lord of the Rings* series by Tolkien (Young 2015). Although Tolkien disavowed racist caricatures as being the root of the description of orcs in his works, there is enough evidence to argue that racism played a part in their depiction (Rearick 2004). At the very least, he seemed to ascribe to the idea that race determined personal abilities and traits. This has been deeply baked into the game mechanics of D&D. As Sturtevant pointed out, "Compounding the problems of Tolkien's scientific racism, in D&D, the relative strengths and weaknesses of the various 'races' are given numerical values" (2017).

Also, consider the drow, the dark-skinned, evil, matrilineal society of underground elves, as another misogynistic and racist depiction of a fantasy culture (Young 2015; Holmes 2023). More recently, Wizards of the Coast published an apology over the descriptions of the Hadozee race in the recent *Spelljammer: Adventures in Space* (Wizards of the Coast 2022; Perkins 2022) and discussed plans to try to distance the monk class from the inherent Asian stereotyping that has been part of the class (Russell 2023).

Additionally, D&D has a history of problematic settings and adventures. 1985's *Oriental Adventures* (Gygax, Cook, and Marcela-Froideval 1985), continuing through some of today's 5e depictions, support orientalism (Trammell 2016). *The Maztica Campaign Set* has had a history of mixed reviews and an ongoing discussion about its colonialist aspects (Applicline 2018). Both of these settings now come with a sensitivity disclaimer but remain published works in the D&D collection.

Regardless of intention, the history of D&D contains assumptions that go against the lessons that I am trying to teach to the next generation of fantasy-loving children. However, I can use the shared hobby of D&D and TRPGs to help students become thoughtful critical thinkers and push back against the cultural tropes of colonialism that they are exposed to in many settings.

3. Discussion: Turning Values into Actionable Steps to Support Learning

We have established that both American larger pop-culture and D&D often come to storytelling with problematic lenses. So how can we combat these colonialist lenses and help students become more empathic people who decenter their own experience and see other points of view? How do we deprogram the next generation of Indiana Jones' and help them become more thoughtful and reflective thinkers? How do we learn to play in a fantasy realm without succumbing to the tropes of colonialism that pervade our bigger American society? In our RPG club, it's all in the expectations and how we build our fictional worlds, regardless of the TRPG system being played.

Heroes' Hall is a once-a-week opt-in afterschool TRPG club at a public school for 10-15-year-olds in Antrim, New Hampshire, USA. Heroes' Hall regularly hosts 40-60 student players per week. Although adults run some tables, and assist with logistics, the majority of play groups are run by peer Dungeon Masters. Students meet on Fridays from October through May.

We begin with D&D at Heroes' Hall because it is what gets players to sit down at the table to begin playing. Although imperfect, D&D is the game that gets players invested in TRPGs as a hobby. It has the largest name recognition in our culture, and has real economic impact, valued at more than US\$15 billion in 2022 (IMARC Group 2023).

With the work of Heroes' Hall, it is our intention to create a table culture of respect and collaboration that students can then take out into the world for their own TRPG adventures in any system.

4. Before the Journey Begins: Setting Clear Table Expectations

The most basic foundation for an anti-colonialist table is to openly have the expectation that it will be anti-colonialist. We set the groundwork for healthy, open communication at the table by making very deliberate choices around set up, how participants speak to each other, and how they talk about the game. This is especially important in a setting where the majority of our tables are by Dungeon Masters (DM) peer leaders, who do not have positional authority or additional expertise beyond that of their players. By striving for a culture of mutual respect and teamwork, it lays the groundwork for our current games, and as importantly, invest in the culture of the future tables of these students.

We begin yearly by teaching everyone in our club the **Heroes' Hall Norms**. Norms provide a basis for understanding about what the expectations are for both how we will treat each other and how we can expect to be treated. They also give us an agreed upon foundation to return to in times of conflict.

1. *Good leaders need good followers and good followers need good leaders.* This means that the DMs are making a commitment to being prepared and making it fun, and the players commit to being governable, focused and playing by the rules.
2. *Actions have consequences in-game and in real life.* This norm speaks to the shared value in our club of logical consequences. How your character behaves will impact the way that the other characters

and NPCs react to them. If you don't want to be jailed, then do not commit arson on the orphanage. If a player wishes to be part of the club, then they must treat other people with respect.

3. *Your character must want to be part of the story.* We love both creative characters, such as Iris, the floating eye wizard, and Chonzan, the purple worm monk. We also love archetypal characters such as Bill, the human rogue and Pyrite, the dragonborn fighter. These four characters shared an adventuring party last school year. Whatever identity our heroes want to explore is welcomed. The one norm that is always enforced with character creation is that the character you choose must have a reason to work together with the other players. We will not allow students to actively work against the DM and other players.
4. *We are all here to have fun!* Our players are 10-14 years old. They need movement breaks, they love to draw pictures of their characters, they may act out sections of their roleplay, and they can get very heated about disagreements. This norm allows us to remember what we are here for and put disagreements into perspective.

Colonialism is rooted in a belief that the colonizer's ideals, culture, perspective, needs, and desires are more important than anyone else's. Norms may not be what is thought of as anti-colonialist but in this setting, the purpose of norms is to begin with an explicit understanding that we are all valued here, and that there are expectations about how we will treat each other. This gives us ways to discuss the inevitable conflict that arises in creative play between teenagers and avoid the loudest voice in the room always being the winning one.

Similarly, we are strong proponents of the use of **safety tools**, sometimes referred to as calibration in role-playing communities. Students need an established way to articulate topics that they do or do not want to have in their adventures. In a middle school setting, there are some basic expectations around in-game behavior – no alcohol or drug use, no explicit sexual content, no cursing, and no derogatory language around gender, sexuality, or race. However, this leaves much to be discussed. What level of violence will be allowed? Is there specific content to avoid so that we can fulfill our norm of being here to have fun? Alternatively, what would you like to see happen in the campaign? Before playing, this conversation is done explicitly to build the culture of our tables so that everyone has a voice, a perspective, and a way to express concerns.

To assist in this process, we utilize the *Lines and Veils* system, originally published by Ron Edwards in 1984 and revised in 2004 (Edwards 2003). Some adults may balk at having these conversations, but the vast majority of middle schoolers understand the concept of lines and veils immediately. This is how I learned that one of my players absolutely hated moths, while another wanted to find a way to play a fantasy version of baseball as one of the group's adventures.

The X card, created by John Stavropoulos in 2013, is a tool that allows anyone at the table to draw an X to veto uncomfortable content without discussion. This way, if someone finds that they are uncomfortable, there is a quick exit strategy, without negotiation (Shaw and Bryant-Monk 2021). In our setting, heroes make an X with their forearms and state "X card" or make a buzzing noise. It is slightly humorous, which allows for any tension to break, the table to have a laugh, and everyone to move forward together. The X card gives power to all players to speak up immediately if they find that they are no longer comfortable with the content of the game.

By having clear norms and strategies for navigating conflict management, we provide scaffolded support for students to have genuine conversations, a safe exchange of ideas, and learn how to speak up when needed. These skills can be applied to many settings beyond the TRPG table and set our students up to consider both their own and other peoples' perspectives.

5. The Role of Story Structure in Anti-Colonialist Teaching

One of our assumptions is that people, both fictional and non-fictional, will do things that benefit them. Therefore, the structure of the adventure goes a long way toward giving players the option to make informed decisions. If the only way to solve the problem is to raze the temple and kill the inhabitants, players will choose to do that by default.

Therefore, if the intention is to avoid reinforcement of colonialist tropes, we must give the players other options. Instead of the use of brute force as an obvious choice, keep the diplomatic option available in the structure of the storyline. Subverting expected tropes and keeping the discussion open between players is important to have young players learn to take **different perspectives**.

Sly Flourish's 2017 *Rosethorn* module (Shea 2017) is an example of this type of thinking. Rosethorn, an unusually intelligent goblin, is uniting local goblin groups for devastating raids on travelers. The party is hired by the sheriff to put an end to it. Over the course of the module, players learn that Rosethorn has a Band of Intellect and is using his new intelligence to unite his people and make their lives better.

Players may still choose to kill Rosethorn and his allies but knowing that his motivation is to help his people allows players to identify with Rosethorn's motivations and consider other options. Ultimately, as educators working to develop the abilities of perspective taking and empathy in our players, the conversation around Rosethorn's intentions and actions is the most important part of this gameplay.

The first-time students played this module, the players decided what the goblins needed was another way to make money. Therefore, they cosigned on a business loan for the goblins, so Rosethorn could start a chain restaurant called Goblin' It Up. Another time, the heroes killed Rosethorn as justice for his crimes. However, in both instances, there was discussion about what was the best thing to do for everyone. This is not something that would have occurred if they had been on a simple caravan guarding job. In using TRPGs in a non-colonialist way, it is imperative that the Dungeon Master create circumstances in which players must truly think about what is best for all, not just what is easy or what they are getting paid to do.

6. Comparing Beginner Modules for Teaching Opportunities

When designing or choosing a TRPG module to play, there are many directions to go in. Compare two adventures on the Dungeon Masters' Guild website. Both are advertised as being training modules for first-time Dungeon Masters and players. Both have a 4.5-star rating. Monique Franzen's *The Laureate Trials* (2019) is a short D&D 5e campaign that pits players against three trials – a trial of agility, a trial of intelligence and teamwork, and a trial of combat against clockwork canine automatons. In a short adventure, new players have an opportunity to learn how to do ability checks, read grid maps, do puzzles, and practice combat. The players are rewarded with membership in the Laureate Guild.

In CJ Leung's *The Death Pit of Morloch* (2000), the players begin the adventure trapped in a cave. They must defeat four cultists, four goblins, and six zombies, and then the head cultist, Crassus. All of these NPCs are hostile. The cultists are religious zealots working for Crassus, and the zombies do not have their own sentient thoughts. There is no clear motivation for the goblins' behavior, and perhaps they work for the cult. They do not appear to be cult members. There is one commoner NPC that they may choose to save as part of the adventure, but otherwise, the way to win this module is to kill everyone except for Crassus, who they can either capture or kill.

Although both modules are well made, *The Laureate Trials* provides a more well-rounded and complex story that sets players up for teamwork and thinking creatively about solutions. *The Death Pit of Moloch* is a more traditional hack-and-slash adventure that does not allow for perspective-taking or unexpected solutions. In this story, the people of this other religion are inherently evil and must be destroyed. By using *The Laureate Trials*, the DM is both explicitly training new players in how to work as a team, but also implicitly teaching players that there are many story alternatives to murder.

7. The Role of Whimsy in Gameplay to Combat Expected Tropes: Something's Cooking

Something's Cooking (Collins 2016) is a module, originally written for D&D 3.5e, that uses whimsy to add to a simple story. The adventure hook for this module states :

Andolyn was a skilled wizard with a love of a good meal, looking for an excuse to settle down from adventuring, while Gendrew was a master chef looking to create new methods of cooking.



... But now one of their experiments has gone horribly wrong, and the characters must save poor Gendrew from his own delicious concoction, while defending themselves from the inhabitants of the cottage, and a couple of unwelcome invaders (2016, 1).

One must not be a pacifist to think anti-colonially. The whimsical setting of *Something's Cooking* allows for unexpected enemies – animated furniture and a calzone golem. The animated furniture and golem, by definition, are automatons. They are not sentient beings in the same way that humanoids are. They are biological robots. This module has the adventure and combat of *The Death Pit of Moloch*, without the need for murdering a dozen sentient people to succeed.

8. The Monsters Know What They're Doing: Creating a World with Purpose

Kenneth Ammann's 2019 book *The Monsters Know What They Are Doing* (2019) lays out the argument that it is better storytelling for the DM to know why each NPC is acting the way they are. NPCs make more interesting choices based on their self-interest instead of just being obstacles in the way of the next treasure to loot.

As described above, we work to throw our parties up against fewer humanoids and more fantastical creatures – more spiders and gelatinous cubes and fewer cultists, guards, goblins, and kobolds. In this way, we are valuing humanoid life and reinforcing the idea that each person is an individual, not a representative of a trope.

Why is that goblin guarding the doorway? Is he saving up for his child to go to wizard school? Does she owe a debt to the BBEG?¹ Using *The Monsters Know What They Are Doing* philosophy, enemies will often run away or offer to parlay to save themselves. This allows for more compromise and for the players to see the character as an individual instead of just a mass of NPCs to slaughter.

Ammann argues that even a giant spider is in a dungeon for a reason. Perhaps it is hungry, or territorial, or guarding eggs. Having motivation for enemies of all kinds makes for much more interesting storytelling and allows for a variety of solutions to problems. It is this shift from seeing others as a mass of NPCs to understanding that other beings have their own wants, needs and values. This is what sews the seeds for anti-colonialist perspectives.

This addition of complex perspective also extends to the game world at large. Beyond just the monsters or individual combatants, DMs need to ask themselves – In my game world, why is this the power structure? Why is this who lives here? Why is their culture this way? Is this important to the plot, or am I just recreating established power structures and prejudices in-game because they come to mind quickly? Although this is a fantasy setting, are there parallels to real life that might be problematic for my players and my story?

As one player said after her character failed at charming a female guard, "She didn't like my character Liza because I rolled a 3, not because I am a girl. If there can be dragons, girls can flirt with girls anytime they want." This is a fantasy world. You are not required to replicate the power structures and problems of the fantasy Middle Ages.

9. A Focus on Natural Consequences

One of the fantasies of the action/adventure genre is the ability to do things with very limited consequences. Imagine a superhero movie where the heroes got a bill for property damage, or did jail time for manslaughter? When there are no consequences to your actions, it is easy to center yourself and your priorities over others. Middle schoolers need to practice the idea that actions have consequences – in-game and in real life. Anyone can do anything they like, but then they have to face the consequences of their actions. Our student DMs make a point to have player actions that impact NPCs, both positive and negative, come back into the story and impact the course of the adventure.

¹ Big Bad Evil Guy/Gal, the main villain.

The character of a 6th-grade boy named Teddy was interacting with an NPC. The DM's intention was to have this NPC give the party a clue about where to start looking for information. However, as he began to speak, Teddy's character came up to him and punched him in the mouth. The NPC was quite indignant but tried one more time to explain that he had seen strange lights in the mountains. However, the player's character did not listen, and punched him again, so he left.

Much later in the story, the party came across this NPC again, after realizing he had many of the answers they needed. He refused to talk to Teddy's character again. The party was incensed that he had not told them what he knew, but became more thoughtful when they realized that their actions had made it so that this NPC did not trust them. Actions have consequences.

A corollary to Actions have Consequences is Murder is Murder. In our games, there are no evil races or random NPCs who deserve to be killed by nature of who they are. If a being has language and culture, then when you kill them, it is murder. Some humanoid creatures may be working for the bad guys, but that doesn't mean that no one cares if they live or die. The world is not filled with random people waiting to be murdered by our heroes. There needs to be a good reason that murder is the best option.

One of the ways that we drive this home is by encouraging players to loot the bodies of low-level NPCs they have killed. The body will have small drawings by the NPC's children, or a contract to deliver eggs to the orphanage, or homework that needs to be turned in for a night class. We discourage murder of the low-level workers and guards by humanizing them beyond being just an obstacle to get past. We have found that this decreases the bloodthirstiness of our players. They save it for boss fights and higher-up enemies, and when we get to those fights, they have an even more dramatic and emotional impact.

10. The Importance of Scaffolding Critical Thinking and Perspective-Taking by Players

Live Action Role-Playing (larp) and TRPG communities use the term "bleed" to describe the connection between fictional characters and the people who play them. Specifically, when players experience moments where their fictional emotions, thoughts, relationships, successes, and failures impact them as real people, and vice versa (Bowman 2015). In actively working to create an anti-colonialist gaming group, we use the experience of bleed to inform students' perspectives and challenge them to think in different or more complex ways about themselves in relationship to others.

Game scenarios and game mechanics are useful to provide scaffolding support for the practice of skills that students cannot yet perform on their own (Westborg and Bowman 2024). This kind of higher-level thinking is not the type of lesson that can be directly taught through lectures. We utilize the in-game world, NPCs, and narrative adventures so that students experience low-stakes situations where bleed from the fiction can be utilized to think in different or more complex ways.

The party of one of my 5th-grade student groups was vacationing at a fictional resort. The party became an accessory to dismantling a strike/hostile takeover of the resort by the mistreated kobold servants. The players were afraid that they would be injured if it came to a fight, and they sided with the rich employers for self-preservation.

Developmentally, many students at this age still often side with the authorities without question (Stewart 2013). Over the next several sessions, I witnessed the players slowly realize that they had condemned the servants to a life of indentured servitude, and they began to question the motives of the fictional resort owners. They began to ask themselves – Who does this course of action benefit? Whose story are we telling? Would all the NPCs in this story agree with our narrative?

The relative ethics of labor disputes is something that students need to think about and rediscover time and time again. It takes time and effort. Playing a TRPGs can give a student the ability to see consequences play out in a setting that is low stakes (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020), because it is fictional. However, they can then apply those lessons to higher stakes non-fictional settings in their real lives. It is that application of critical thinking that gives us more ethical and thoughtful people outside of the game.

11. Humanizing the Player Characters

Downtime activities can allow players to have a better understanding of their own characters. They do not have to be epic heroes all the time. No one can go from epic battle to epic battle without a rest. Let the characters be humanized. Who do they care about? Why? What do they like to do or eat? What would happen if you went to their parents' house for dinner?

Our players report enjoying doing activities such as decorating their characters' room in a shared house, dressing up for a masquerade ball, shopping, taming horses and picking their names, pet shopping, writing real postcards to each other in character and mailing them to each other, playing casino games, drawing their characters, looking for art online that shows what their character might look like, creating memes about things that happened in-game and having low stakes mini-adventures in a tea house or tavern setting.

In this way, students allow themselves to imagine their heroes as people, not just as a collection of colonialist heroic tropes. This low-stakes perspective-taking gives practice for perspective-taking and empathy in the real world. If a student can imagine themselves and their game party as three-dimensional beings, they can also do so with other people they know less well.

Not only do the monsters know what they are doing, but the heroes do, too. They should have relationships, interests, and values that matter to them. This often allows for better storytelling, higher emotional stakes, and fun.

12. Conclusion

Can TRPGs save the real world? We have seen our students become more creative, accepting, and whimsical people through their *Dungeons & Dragons* adventures. The semi-structured social interactions and long-term, but ultimately low-stakes, consequences teach children more than any lecture about kindness ever will.

The anti-colonialist behaviors in this article will not suddenly end colonialist bias in children or solve the historical biases embedded in *Dungeons & Dragons* itself. However, by setting clear norms of engagement, writing thoughtful campaigns, and giving players agency, DMs can set the stage for students to become more thoughtful critical thinkers, negotiators, and people.

Kids are smart and open to new ideas. They want to be good people and have fun. As Nell Noddings said, "Through dialogue, modeling, the provision of practice, and the attribution of best motive, the one-caring as teacher nurtures the ethical idea. She cannot nurture the student intellectually without regard for the ethical ideal unless she is willing to risk producing a monster" (Noddings 1986, 179)." As anti-colonialist DMs know, the real adventure is sending heroes out into the world who can self-advocate without centering only their own perspective and work towards a more equitable world.

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