

Sticks and Stones: The Power of the Words We Use

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Written by: Laneta Fitisemanu and Moana 'Ulu'ave



This month feels heavy. Because, well... it is.

We celebrate Pride Month, a time to recognize and honor the LGBTQ+ community. But even as we celebrate, it's impossible to ignore the challenges. This year, Utah became the [first state](#) in the country to ban Pride flags in public spaces, including schools.

Over the weekend, amid national protests for immigration justice, our State witnessed a shooting that resulted in the [death](#) of Afa Ah Loo—a beloved fashion designer, father, husband, and a beloved member from our Pasifika community. Afa immigrated to the United States from Samoa and obtained U.S. citizenship last year. Afa was so talented, but what made him extraordinary was his ability to traverse boundaries, connect people, and build community. In a now widely shared interview, he left us with a powerful reminder: “Always be kind. The world needs it.”

Just a day later, four more lives, including an 8-month-old baby, were lost to [gun violence](#) at West Fest.

As we reflect on Pride, policy, and personal loss, we ask: What kind of world have

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we built?

We invite you to read our co-authored piece, a collaboration, and a process to help us understand what's at stake, what is happening in this policy space, and the dangers we face when our words are as deadly as bullets.

"Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt you."

That old saying doesn't hold up anymore. Time and time again, we've seen that words do hurt and leave lasting marks.

In fact, it always starts with a word.

Savage. Vermin. Lazy. Dirty. Thug. Terrorist. Illegals. Predator. Freeloaders.

All are just words— slipping from one person's lips into children's ears, passed down from one generation to the next.

Words are powerful, and they gain strength as they are shaped into images, which then become perceptions and ultimately lead to reality. They begin to no longer become just words. They become actions.

Banning books. Eliminating pronouns. Copyright ownership of indigenous words. Removing federal educational protections and dismantling diversity programs. They aren't just buzzwords or trends; they have [real consequences](#) for children and families.

We wrote this blog as two concerned mothers, aunties, and daughters, Pasifika women of color, watching and wondering what will be left for our children. As children of the diaspora, words are what connect us back to our homelands. The answers we seek continue to be embedded in the past.

In the words of the ancestors: *I ka w? mamua, ka w? mahope*, the future is in the past. Or, how we can interpret this today is that learning and understanding the truth

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changes everything.

With that in mind, here are our thoughts and a bit of our history. Let's dive into how words have shaped harmful rhetoric and policy, and what those impacts mean for all kids.



The arrival of Christianity changed everything. Early foreigners and missionaries didn't just bring disease; they also brought a written language, which opened new ways for our people to interact with the world. It created opportunities to record and share our culture and history, but it also came at a huge cost.

That same written language became a tool of colonization. It was used to control, erase, and "civilize." Children were forced to abandon their native tongues and learn English. Traditional practices were stripped away, and literacy was taught not to empower, but to assimilate and to diminish our power over our own land and voices.

To salt the wound, words were used to erase our histories by rewriting it, reshaping our narratives, and replacing our humanity with the words that would trickle down through generations: lazy, stupid, violent, dangerous.

A few centuries later, we're still here. Still processing the consequences. We now have access to educational spaces our ancestors were denied, and we're learning histories that even our parents and grandparents never had the chance to know.

What's Happening Today

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Currently, one of the dangers of harmful language and imagery is adults on social media who sacrifice children's privacy and mental health in the service of their ideological culture wars. Our public discourse, especially on social media, has resulted in attacks on marginalized kids, leading to their exclusion and oppression in schools, families, and government buildings.

In Utah, numerous examples have emerged in recent years of the pervasive and weaponization of social media to target children, seeking to intimidate, shame, and publicly 'out' young people. Outing a person has always been a harmful, violent act, but to do so, sometimes even inaccurately, on public platforms has and will have long-lasting effects on the targeted child and the collective children who learn what it means to wield power unchecked and unverified:

- Recently, the advocacy group Utah Parents United, shared a [cartoon graphic](#) falsely depicting a transgender child as an adult in a locker room, re-enacting a situation in an [Illinois school district](#). The graphic's caption states, 'Protecting Student Privacy in Utah...Utah is leading the way in protecting student privacy and dignity.'
- Just last year, Utah State Board of Education member Natalie Cline [sparked outrage](#) after wrongfully questioning the gender of a 16-year-old girl, which led to severe harassment and cyberbullying of the child by adults. While Cline ultimately lost her position, the harm was done, and the subsequent spread of misinformation within the community had lasting consequences for the child and her family.
- [A viral conspiracy theory](#) warned of the dangers of "furries" — children wearing animal ear headbands or animal costumes and playing (as children do), who were supposedly taking over Utah schools and hurting their classmates. The viral posts quickly turned nasty, with anti-LGBTQ groups spreading fake stories. Multiple schools experienced hoax [bomb threats](#) due to unverified photos and videos circulating online, by adults, of children in animal costumes barking and biting. This sounds unreal, but unfortunately, it is true that adults bullied children for a hobby and self-expression.
- This past month, a Logan teacher defied school officials by refusing to remove harmful [student-made posters](#) that negatively stereotype immigrants. These posters made immigrant students feel unwelcome and stop coming to school.
- Meanwhile, just across the border in Idaho, a local school district told a

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teacher to [remove](#) her “everyone is welcome” signs, which display different hand colors, because the signs were too “political.”

It is clear that Utah has a culture problem. And this problem is adults bullying children.

It's worth asking: Who are we truly protecting, and how? Right now, it's not all of the 900,000 children that live in our state; it's just some of them.

But this isn't new.

The Dangerous Cycle of Propaganda

Throughout history, visual propaganda and offensive cartoons have been used and continue to be used to dehumanize and vilify entire communities. Today, we are seeing these same tactics used against transgender youth and other marginalized children. The harsh truth is that the real harm isn't coming from these children; it's coming from the adults promoting fear, hate, and misinformation.

Who will ultimately suffer the consequences of this harmful rhetoric and propaganda?

All children--regardless of how they identify.



When adults manufacture fear through misleading imagery and rhetoric, they are not just targeting other children—they are sending a dangerous message to all kids:

- Who belongs and who doesn't.
- Who deserves dignity, and who doesn't?
- Who warrants protection, and who doesn't?

This kind of rhetoric is profoundly damaging, and it undermines a core value of our

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society that we protect every child.

Mental health is already one of the most pressing issues Utah children face today:

- Utah has one of the [highest rates](#) of child and adolescent mental health disorders.
- [Nearly half](#) of Utah's youth who need mental health services do not receive treatment.
- Suicide is the [leading cause](#) of death for ages 10-17.

In response, the Utah Legislature has prioritized and recently passed [several bills](#) aimed at [protecting](#) children against the harmful effects of social media. Yet, in the same breath, adults, including elected officials, are using social media to spread fear and damaging rhetoric.

If we're concerned about social media's influence on children, we should be equally alarmed by the messages adults are spreading about children, and the messages kids are absorbing in the process.

When adults use social media to target or shame kids, they're not only causing direct harm, they're also modeling cruelty, exclusion, and fear as acceptable forms of public discourse.

When Propaganda Becomes Policy

Our state has passed exclusionary legislation eliminating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), part of a broader, coordinated push across the country to undo hard-won protections. These rollbacks don't just impact communities of color; it affects women, people with disabilities, veterans, and many others who have fought to be heard and seen.

So we begin to ask: What's next for our children?

If eliminating DEI is being sold as the path to equity, will it actually deliver? And at what cost (there always is one)?

When I became a parent about ten years ago, I could not have imagined the world

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my children would be living in today. We were happily getting settled as a family, and we assumed the American institutions, though flawed, were improving each year with diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and practices influencing every level of government. Public schools, higher education, and even private institutions seem to be on a progressive and more inclusive trajectory.

Fast forward nine years, two Trump administrations in, and that reality seems a distant past. With the barrage of executive orders and the elimination of many social service programs that support marginalized communities, the anxiety about what the present and future will look like for my children is unfolding [even as I write](#).

To better understand our analysis of the present and possible future, we created this graphic, which provides a visual explanation of the slow and steady erosion that occurs when scary ideology is adopted through language and then weaponized to eliminate marginalized groups until all we have left is the very privileged few.



This graphic was inspired from an interview with the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel:

“First we were deprived from of our address, then from our citizenship, then of our home, then of our family, then of our name, then of our life.”

Wiesel’s words still ring true today. Fascism doesn’t happen overnight. As it was in WWII, it was methodical, incremental, slow, and steady until incomprehensible acts of violence, eugenics, and genocide happened. Wiesel often talked about the masses of “neutral” people who stood by and did nothing in the face of such atrocities.

This phenomenon is upon us.

The jump from words to executive actions has a clear throughline. Words slipped into our seemingly innocuous lexicon—disabled, trans, illegals—turn into policy that

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eliminates any mention of the 'other' or attempts to level the playing field for the 'other', such as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives and Social Emotional Learning pedagogy.

We want to be clear: Ultimately, children pay the price for adults' policy.

[Every child-centered social policy net](#) is being considered for elimination or has already been slashed: Medicaid, Headstart, free school lunch, protections for special needs, early education, child care subsidies, SNAP, and funding to decrease child abuse. The safety of our children is being compromised, and as one of the most vulnerable groups in this country who cannot vote, their voices are being co-opted by adults to represent whatever is convenient to those adults' political agendas.

These programs are for [the public good](#). And if we no longer fund these, our whole society suffers.

“When the people with power in a society see a portion of the populace as inferior and undeserving, their definition of ‘the public’ becomes conditional. It’s often unconscious, but their perception of the Other as undeserving is so important to their perception of themselves as deserving that they’ll tear apart the web that supports everyone, including them. Public goods, in other words, are only for the public we perceive to be good.”

-Heather McGhee, The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together

The current administration stated that one of [their highest priorities](#) is the safety of children, and they believe the biggest threat to children today is trans folks. Their main priority is to eliminate trans students from athletic competitions. This is a smoke screen. Targeting the most vulnerable kids, trans kids, will keep the masses busy looking in another direction, whilst all other institutional supports are cut from under us. The repercussions will be devastating, particularly here in Utah, which receives [most of its funding that serves marginalized kids from the federal government](#).

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We could see outcomes that look like more kids in the [juvenile justice system](#), [more mental health issues](#), untreated and undiagnosed, a rise in [poor health outcomes](#), and [child homelessness](#). This may sound alarmist, but it is the reality of defunding.

Where do we go from here?

We can always learn from the past. The past is teaching us that we do not have the moral luxury to stand idly by while the fundamental human rights of children are slowly being stripped away.

We, as parents, still have a choice.

We have the choice to support public investment in our children. That looks like more, not less, funding for public education, kids' healthcare, and child care. The alternative is dire. When there are no investments, parents must choose between work, having kids, or putting food on the table. If people want to improve low birth rates, starting with public investment and not divestment is the way to go.

So, what will you choose?

For us, we choose ourselves, our communities, our children, and there is still power in that.