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Budhai, S. S., & Heath, M. K. (2025). *Critical AI in K–12 classrooms: A practical guide for cultivating justice and joy*. Harvard Education Press.

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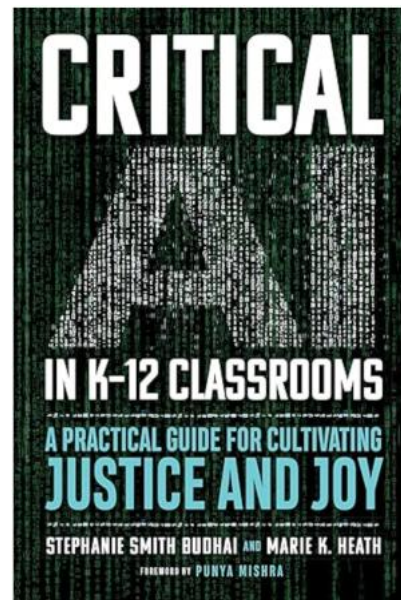
**Reviewed by Jeanne Charles
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Artificial intelligence (AI) now finds its way into nearly every corner of schooling, often faster than teachers can respond. In *Critical AI in K–12 Classrooms*, Stephanie Smith Budhai and Marie K. Heath slow that rush long enough for educators to think clearly about what AI means for teaching, fairness, and the human spirit that drives both.

From the opening pages, the authors remind readers that AI is never neutral. Each system reflects the choices of its designers and the biases of its data. They ask teachers to pause before adopting new tools and to consider who might benefit and who might be left out. This approach keeps the focus on ethical reflection rather than novelty and helps readers feel that careful questioning is a strength, not procrastination.

Budhai and Heath write with a voice that feels both scholarly and personal. They base their approach on culturally sustaining, abolitionist, and fugitive pedagogies, and they explain those terms in plain language. Culturally sustaining practice honors the students in front of us educators. Abolitionist teaching looks for ways to remove harm rather than decorate it. Fugitive pedagogy gives teachers permission to step away from technologies that do not yet serve their learners well. These frameworks keep the conversation about people, not platforms.

Throughout the book, theory and classroom life woven close together. Each chapter offers examples that a teacher can imagine trying the next day. The authors describe how a class might test an image generator for bias or analyze the wording of chatbot replies for subtle stereotyping. The goal is not to master



every tool but to help students see how systems work and how those systems shape what we know.

One of the book’s quiet strengths is its authors’ respect for teacher judgment. Budhai and Heath never prescribe a single use for AI. Instead, they invite reflection, dialogue, and experimentation. Readers will feel guided rather than instructed.

The authors strike a tone that shows real understanding of what teachers face today. Many teachers are already stretched thin by constant change that never seems to pause. Budhai and Heath write with compassion for that reality. Their discussion of “refusal” stands out because it treats boundaries as part of good teaching. They describe moments when saying no to a new tool protects students and makes room for deeper learning. This idea feels honest and refreshing in a culture where innovation often means saying yes to everything new. The authors remind us that discernment is part of professional courage.

The writing balances honesty with hope. Budhai and Heath do not dismiss technology, nor do they glorify it. They show that awareness and creativity can live side by side. By treating justice and joy as compatible goals, they make ethical teaching feel both possible and rewarding. The language remains clear and direct, giving readers confidence that they can act on what they learn.

Some educators may wish for longer lesson plans or full units. The authors instead offer frameworks meant to grow with practice. That choice fits the spirit of the book: trust teachers to adapt, experiment, and learn alongside their students.

In the wider conversation about educational technology, *Critical AI in K–12 Classrooms* stands out for its humility. It complements the work of scholars such as Ruha Benjamin, Safiya Noble, and Punya Mishra while keeping its feet grounded in real classrooms. The foreword by Mishra sets a tone that urges teachers to use design thinking and moral imagination together.

Budhai and Heath impart steady encouragement rather than alarm. They ask educators to lead with empathy, question systems that shape their students’ worlds, and build communities where both fairness and curiosity can thrive. *Critical AI in K–12 Classrooms* is a trustworthy guide for those who believe that technology should serve learning and that learning should always serve humanity.

About the Reviewer

Jeanne Charles is a doctoral student in educational technology at Boise State University. She is the author of *EdTech AI Insights: A ChatGPT Playbook for CTE Teachers*. Her research explores AI-supported teaching practices and the integration of technology in high school and corporate learning environments. Through her website, EdTechAIInsights.com, she shares Quick Reads and in-depth articles that connect her doctoral research to practical applications for educators.



About the Book Authors

Stephanie Smith Budhai is an associate professor in the School of Education at the University of Delaware. Dr. Budhai holds a Ph.D. from Drexel University in learning technologies and an M.S. in information with a specialization in library and information science. She holds K-12 teaching certifications in technology education, instructional technology, computers and information technology, special education and elementary education. Dr. Budhai has published nine books, two of which have been translated into Arabic.



Marie K. Heath is an assistant professor of educational technology at Loyola University Maryland. Her research centers inquiry on the intersection of civic engagement and technology in order to foster social change. Prior to working in higher education, Marie taught secondary social studies in Baltimore County Public Schools. Dr. Heath is the current Editor for *Social Studies Education of College and University Faculty Assembly (CUFA)* of the National Council for the Social Studies.



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