

Acts of Solidarity: Developing Urban Social Justice Educators in the Struggle for Quality Public Education

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In many instances, teacher education programs have been positioned as apolitical entities with the task of preparing teachers to perform the duties and responsibilities of the profession. Instead, the position of the authors is that because teaching is a deeply political endeavor that requires expert knowledge of issues beyond the classroom, teacher education programs must embrace a particular responsibility. We agree with Cochran-Smith that teacher education is a political issue that requires “an intentional blurring of the roles of teacher education practitioner, teacher education researcher, and critic/analyst of the policies, political agendas, and popular and professional discourses that directly or indirectly influence teacher education” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 4). In so doing, we recognize that “political” in this sense is not referencing electoral partisan politics. Instead, it is in reference to the overt and nuanced power relationships between the state (both local

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and federal), public policy, and its residents. Teaching should not be considered outside of this construct.

By taking the position that teaching for social justice is an act of necessity and solidarity, this work seeks to highlight two examples of teacher education initiatives. Because the relationships between teacher, student, family, school, and state are integral to the teaching process, three central questions guide our thinking and teaching. The first question in our inquiry is *in what ways can teacher education be re-conceptualized in relation to communities to address the political function of teaching?* Secondly, *how can teacher education renegotiate traditional relationships with key stakeholders to move towards social justice education?* Finally, *what specific strategies and innovations are teacher educators implementing within communities and schools to develop social justice educators?*

In order to engage these questions, we operate from Freire's position of developing conscientization within teacher education candidates (Freire, 1993). Herein is the process of developing consciousness-raising within teacher education candidates in order to reflect and begin to ask critical questions of their practice as teachers. Discussed in detail in later sections, the two cases cited here speak to the process of making it possible for teachers to create such conditions without fear of persecution. To start the process, we begin with a working definition of social justice in education. Following this section is a brief section linking the contexts of teacher education for social justice in Chicago and New York City. The third section (titled Part One) is a narrative example of building school and community relationships in Chicago, outlining the process by which a teacher educator engaged a school and the surrounding community as well as an example of a collaborative teacher designed assessment tool for preservice teachers. The fourth section of the document (titled Part Two) discusses the New York context, providing an example of what building solidarity with student and community looks like at the classroom level. Concluding the document is a discussion of the importance of social justice in teacher education education in a day and age where local, state, and national conversations are dominated by the rhetoric of market economy and standardization.

On Method and Positionality

As this article is a narrative account of our experiences as teacher educators, it should also be considered in the line of research that takes into account the commitment of the scholar activist to work in solidarity with schools and communities (e.g., Thui-wai-Smith, 1999; Lipman in Koval et. al., 2007; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2007). Recognizing the exploitative relationships in which researchers have engaged over the years to gain "access" to communities for the sake of gathering data and presenting at conferences, we do not seek the same association. Our accountability as researchers includes recognizing the importance of the aforementioned groups speaking for themselves, rightfully claiming ownership of their roles, duties, and responsibilities.

We are writing this document in an attempt to be explicit about issues concerning race and class. As two White females (one of Jewish Heritage, the other an immigrant from Greece) and an African-American male, we do not shy away from race and the spaces we are perceived to occupy in the world of teacher education. Instead, we make the issues salient and explicit in our classes taught at our respective institutions. The idea is to demonstrate intentionality in the process of how we grapple with potential issues of difference in the communities in which we work. Instead of isolating our students, the idea is to bring them into the fold of working with schools and communities through a social justice lens.

Towards a Working Definition of Social Justice Education

For educators at the classroom, community, and university level, it becomes important to provide “working” definitions for several reasons. First, the idea that the definition is “working” means that it is open to interpretation and connotes a level of praxis (action and reflection on the world in order to change it). Second, it allows people who may not be familiar with social justice in education to grapple with an interpretation of the concept while attempting to create a meaningful iteration for their own practice. Lastly, a working definition allows a space for those concerned with social justice in education to agree or disagree with the concept.

For the purposes of this work, we use social justice education to speak to *the day-to-day processes and actions utilized in classrooms and communities centered in critical analysis, action, and reflection (praxis) amongst all educational stakeholders (students, families, teachers, administrators, community organizations, community members) with the goal of creating tangible change in their communities, cities, states, nation, and the larger world.* In changing the collective conditions of said spaces, the concern is centered in the informed decision making of teachers, students, parents, and community members through the raising of social, political, racial and economic consciousness. Referenced as conscientization, or praxis, Freire referred to the concept as action and reflection in the world in order to change it (Freire, 1993). Beyond the rhetoric of social justice in education as “community service days” or neighborhood clean up initiatives, social justice connects the concerns of the aforementioned groups to the larger constructs of oppression in the form of racism, classism, gender subjugation, homophobia, ageism, and ableism. Teaching, in this sense, becomes part of the broader political project of identifying and eliminating oppression. It is liberatory because it operates under the premise of tapping into the under-utilized expertise of students, parents, and families combined with academic skills to address their conditions. In this instance teachers are engaged in a struggle to learn and provide a tangible example of what justice looks like in a classroom and the community at large. These are not places to be “saved” by do-gooders or missionaries. Instead, they are sites to engage solidarity, political clarity and knowledge of one’s self (Camangian, 2009).

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Many teachers, particularly those who come from communities different from the ones in which they teach (with particular regards to race and class), hold deficit views of their students and neighborhoods (Weiner, 2006). Seeing their students only as a laundry-list of problems, these educators are unable to look past students' more challenging behavior, making meaningful and reciprocal relationships impossible. Unable to connect to their students, their efforts at classroom management and instruction fail, and they in turn blame their students for what has ultimately stemmed from their negative and stereotyped views of their students. Until this pattern is addressed, teaching for social justice is an impossible hope for such candidates.

Linking the Realities of Chicago and New York City

In developing conscientization, it becomes important to develop intimate knowledge of one's teaching environment. In reference to the two cases cited in this document, the politics of educational reform are pivotal in developing critical analysis in new teachers. Where these are examples from just two cities, they become important in the national dialogue on the preparation of urban teachers. Because practices and personnel (i.e., Arne Duncan, former CEO of Chicago Public Schools and current U.S. Secretary of Education) from both cities are used as exemplary models, Chicago and New York City provide relevant examples for teachers and teacher educators in the current climate.

Once called "the worst school system in the country" by William Bennett during the Reagan Administration, the city of Chicago has engaged a number of reforms that are used as models for urban school districts across the country. Predating the No Child Left Behind federal policy, the Chicago Public Schools' (CPS) policy brief entitled *Every Child, Every School* spoke for the need for change in the district. New York City's department of education (DOE) has also observed these spaces and made significant strides to replicate Chicago's efforts. Both cities currently share mayoral control (elimination of an elected school board while relinquishing the appointment of the school board to the mayor's office), benchmark high-stakes testing, mandated curriculum for low-performing schools, and massive school closings. The mayor's offices in both cities are staunch supporters of initiatives to dispel the negative reputation of the district by introducing charter schools, magnet schools, and privatization—all supposedly to give parents more options for their children.

Furthermore, Mayoral control of the school board (where members of the school board are appointed by the mayor) has centralized decision-making power when it comes to the allocation of funds to implement policy. The most recent example of this power came with the unveiling of *Renaissance 2010*. The Chicago Public Schools (CPS), in conjunction with the Civic Committee of The Commercial Club of Chicago produced *Renaissance 2010*, an over-arching policy proposing to close 70 existing underperforming schools and re-open them as 100 new schools under the rubric of a charter, contract, or performance school. It is clear that such

restructuring efforts are closely aligned with the goals of business elites as well as the certification and hiring of new teachers who are hastily prepared in non-traditional, alternative programs (Fleming, Greenlee, Gutstein, Lipman, & Smith, 2009; Kumashiro, 2010). In New York City, philanthropic and management organizations have teamed with the DOE to create privately managed public schools that undermine localized public educational options.

For teacher education, the political contexts of Chicago and New York City provide insight as to how the role of teachers and teacher educators are positioned within the national and local discourse around education. In both cities, education “reforms” continue to negatively impact many African-American and Latino/a poor and working-class communities. As families supposedly “choose” their educational options under current reform strategies, missing from the equation is the fact that many are unable to select said opportunities. In both cities, due to the lack of affordable housing, poor and working class families are unable to afford rents within the city limits, limiting their access to the newly presented “options.” “Choice” in this sense is often a false one, because it is only afforded to the few that are able to navigate the complex terrain of educational “options.” Simultaneously, the loaded rhetoric of “accountability” and “responsibility” serve as coded proxies, making tests scores the de facto marker of academic achievement (Lipman in Koval et al, 2007, p. 480).

Taking into account these realities, the following two case studies serve as examples of what teacher education programs can do in schools with pre-service and new teachers to develop community-centered teaching. Instead of viewing the following accounts as “one-size-fits-all” models, they should be viewed as tangible examples of the possibilities for teacher education for social justice. Because we are three authors attempting to amalgamate our experiences as teacher educators, as well as activists and concerned community members, our voices differ in our explanations of our particular experience. Nevertheless, we hope to encourage other teacher educators to explore the connections between their experiences, ultimately speaking to the collective significance of multiple perspectives on authentic community engagement.

Part One:

Chicago—The Making of Urban Teachers

Given the current climate of teacher preparation in which there is both an unprecedented barrage of criticisms on schools of education as well as the increasing opportunities for CPS to hire in its ranks from alternative routes (read: Teach for America and the Chicago equivalent in the Chicago Teaching Fellows Program), there have been several calls that teacher education in colleges and universities needs to be re-conceptualized and redefined (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2006; Murrell, 2001). Notably, Zeichner (2006, 2010) finds essential that, among other considerations, as teacher educators we must “change the center of gravity of teacher education

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programs so that the connections between universities, schools, and communities in the preparation of teachers are stronger and less hierarchical” (p. 330), and offers the distinct notion of “hybrid” or “third” spaces that link teacher preparation programs with schools and communities in more egalitarian and collaborative partnerships. From this perspective, the Chicago case sketched here offers an example of a hybrid space, in which as the teacher educator, I concern myself in building and sustaining a more dialectical relationship with my colleagues in the schools and communities—spaces that are central in the development of the pre-service teachers as caring and ethical urban teachers.

The College of Education: Collective and Individual Interpretations of Our Vision

In concert with our *Conceptual Framework* and strategic plan and mission that explicitly state our commitment to many of the under-served schools and communities of Chicago, we have been making numerous recruitment and admission efforts as well as some very deliberate programmatic decisions. While programmatic and curricular changes in our teacher preparation programs are examined in detail elsewhere (e.g., Katsarou, 2009), as well in another section of this article, and pertaining to the New York City case, the focus here is on the centrality of *relationship* building between the university and the schools in which teacher candidates are placed to conduct fieldwork, thus enabling a *community of teacher educators* that deliberately and jointly engage in the preparation of urban teachers.

The overall ethos of the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) is concentrated on *developing urban* educators who are informed in their coursework about how culture, language, and poverty shape and influence students’ lives, and who have a deep understanding of how to use cultural and linguistic diversity as assets in the classroom. In the case of the work that I have been doing for many years with the CPS teachers and schools, I believe it is critical and imperative that the development of committed urban teachers must presuppose that teacher candidates be situated in spaces—i.e., *schools*—where the significant adults—i.e., *mentor teachers, school leaders*—possess the clarity about what they need to be doing within their particular context—i.e., the severe *constraints and politics* of the larger space/district, so that children stand to benefit. The current rendering suggests a possible means for such a complex and multi-faceted aim by pointing to first, how *relationships* among school folks in urban settings and university instructors are formed and how these are sustained in order to better serve and thoughtfully prepare teacher candidates. Second, the notion of *community* as it is usually reported—as for instance, in the documentation and existence of “professional learning communities” and “teacher practice”—is shifting in this account to include other topics of discussion and concern. To this end, the main topic of discussion among this *community* is the education of preservice teachers in terms of their dispositions and habits of mind

during their student teaching field experience and subsequent induction into the same school sites and communities.

In my role as a clinical professor at UIC, I have built long-standing relationships with many schools in the CPS system. For the past fifteen years, I chose very deliberately both the particular sites and the particular teachers that would mentor my students for a variety of internships during their pre-service training. This means that none of the sites chosen for this work are charter schools; none are purely selective enrollment schools (as in one case, the school has two programs serving a district-wide student population as well as the immediate neighborhood); and, given the de-facto segregation of CPS, all are schools that serve all-Latino or all-African-American students (in a couple of cases, the ratio is 3 to 1 of either group).

The teachers that serve as mentors to my students are typically teachers with whom I have some kind of connection: in the best case scenario, these teachers may have graduated from our programs at UIC and are now selected to be included in what I have called elsewhere members of the *inter-generational/inter-institutional community of teacher educators* (e.g., Katsarou, 2010). As the name suggests, this core group of mentoring teachers is comprised of former students that are now mentoring teachers. But, the selection of this group is dependent on three important considerations: our commitment to caring and liberatory teaching for urban students; our common beliefs as to what constitutes good teaching practice; and our understanding that field instruction for teacher candidates is manifested in significant ways and primarily via our very collaboration and mutual respect for one another and the work that we do with the teacher candidates. The next best-case scenario is that the selected teachers are folks with whom I have had ample conversations on the subject of urban teaching or have observed or witnessed their own enactments of social justice within the CPS curricular constraints. No match between a teacher candidate and a mentor teacher is ever made without the explicit and direct knowledge of a mentor's political and pedagogical stance on the teaching of urban youngsters. The first example cited here, that of a new school partner, Lance School, belongs to the second scenario and is briefly recounted next.

The Lance School/UIC College of Education Partnership

Lance School houses nearly one thousand students, all African-American, all children from a neighborhood that is known for its poverty but also for its historical significance. Mostly two and three-story buildings, in wide tree-lined boulevards, make up the immediate surroundings, and the school's own flower and vegetable garden is a marvel—it is the pride and joy of the entire community. At the reporting of this work, the Lance School community partnership consists of the teachers, the principal, myself as the field instructor and main College liaison, two groups of teacher candidates, and four newly hired teachers that were my former students. This is a rather new collaboration—this being the beginning of the third year. Nonetheless, it is clear that it has been the confluence of factors, as well as key players, that have

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given rise to this collaboration within a defined and admirably short amount of time. These factors and key players have contributed to the ways in which teachers at the school relate to one another, how teachers perceive collaboration with the College, and how, together, we value urban teaching as a worthwhile and necessary endeavor.

In terms of overall numbers, it is safe to claim that we have reached *critical mass* that is aimed at changing the education of the children: First, in placing fourteen teacher candidates in K-8 classrooms in two years' time, we are working very closely with a core group of five mentoring teachers and with six additional teachers and support personnel more peripherally. Second, Dr. Johnson, the principal and new leader of four years, has made his mark by paying very close attention to our collaboration, coupled with his evaluation of teachers; evaluations that were based on how teachers—most of whom were inherited—treated the children and the parents, accomplished yearly academic gains, and were in tandem with his vision of the school. Lastly, it is important to recount the relationship with one of the Lance teachers, Mr. Warren; one that I have had for ten years, as it will illuminate the ways in which the current relationship with the Lance community has indeed flourished.

Mr. Warren is a teacher I followed to Lance from another school in the same area. I consider him my *partner-in-teacher-education* and this has been the case over the many years and in working with candidates of varying abilities and dispositions. In all the time he and I have mentored teacher candidates, we have had many “courageous conversations” as coined by Glenn Singleton, indicating necessary exchanges about the role of race in education (e.g., Singleton & Linton, 2006). Some of these were hurried and some long and sustained but, always, they were about what constitutes good teaching in an urban setting, the role of race (his and the children's) in the education of his students in his grade six classroom, the mind-numbing effects of the debilitating assessment and curricular constraints of the CPS system, the role of a White school leader in lending support to teachers of color in an all-Black school. When Mr. Warren reached out to join Lance School, he interviewed Dr. Johnson as much he was interviewed for a grade six position. It follows that it was no surprise when I got a call from him in the fall of his first year at Lance, and he reported that he had found the school we had both been looking for: Austin area neighborhood school, great new leader who did not shy away from addressing “race” with his teachers, and home to some great teachers to boot. Of course, his assessment, one I implicitly trusted, was exactly right. At present, even though my perspective of Lance has shifted somewhat, my sense is that it is essentially a place that can only develop in ways that I cannot predict.

The way in which the first group of teachers was matched with the five candidates in year one of the collaboration was a strategic and clever plan. Four of the mentors were Lance teachers with an average teaching experience of thirty years in CPS; the fifth teacher was Mr. Warren. The five candidates were matched by paying close attention to areas of concentration as well as perceived dispositional alignment. These matches proved to have been made in fieldwork-placement heaven.

In one instance, the science K-4 teacher who had followed Dr. Johnson to Lance, was matched with a Latino male candidate who currently holds his mentor's science position: she convinced the principal that the candidate, Joel, was "made for this position" and she has subsequently moved to a self-contained grade two classroom. Between the two of them, they initiated the growth of a vegetable and flower garden that received district and media attention. Besides the children that were the main beneficiaries of the garden, parents and grandparents also participated in unprecedented ways and vied to take charge and sustain it over the school breaks and summer. In another instance, an iconic Lance School teacher of thirty-years, Ms. Ruhl, found her match in the face and spirit of an equally vibrant and bright Black woman, Cora, who catapulted the grade six youngsters and Ms. Ruhl into a deep historical study of the neighborhood, its inhabitants—complete with interviewing the elders of the community, and its many places of worship and cultural significance. All this was concurrent to the national campaign and election of the new President, Barack Obama. Cora, single-handedly—though she acknowledges the President having played a role as well—has paved the way for Ms. Ruhl to see what a new generation of Black teachers can provide for the students she has loved but had kept inside the bars of a stilted curriculum. Cora was also hired as a new teacher upon graduation and remains Ms. Ruhl's protégé.

A few comments about the school are warranted. When Dr. Johnson inherited Lance from his predecessor, the school had been deemed by the district as being "under probation"—that technically means there is a lot of curricular scrutiny and strict attention to "data." While these are issues to which the principal pays close attention, neither has weighed him down. Dr. Johnson made some very savvy decisions—both in terms of hiring new teachers coupled with the dismissal of others, as well as the leadership he exhibited in terms of setting specific academic and community-based goals. By the end of the academic year and year one of our partnership, he made it known that he would not hire back thirteen teachers, mostly folks who had shown chronic resistance to change and overtly challenged the direction of the school leadership. Of the new hires he made, four were teacher candidates that graduated from our program at UIC this past May—Cora and Joel included, as highlighted above; of those, three had conducted their internship at Lance. At the same time, and after a lot of negotiation, he accomplished acquiring a "technology academy" status for Lance, for which he aptly negotiated that seventy percent of the student spots would be from the surrounding neighborhood and not the typical approach of magnet schools in Chicago that would have largely excluded the community children. This negotiation was hailed as a victory by the parents of Lance as well as the larger community.

***The Design of an Assessment Tool:
A Community Effort in Determining Who's Got
The Goods To Become an Urban Teacher***

What follows is a second, albeit abbreviated, example of the Chicago case and the ways in which there was a deliberate choice in actualizing the Peter Murrell (2001) notion of “community teacher.” The backdrop of this story begins with how all of us, as teacher educators, deal with the perennial dilemma in assessing our candidates at numerous points during our programs. At UIC, such dilemmas reflect both our steadfast resolve that we do not let unwilling and un-reflective candidates slide through, but at the same time, make explicit and transparent for our students what it is that we expect them to be able to sense and do as urban teachers. In such an effort to explore what candidates’ dispositional knowledge could be and how to develop ways to make that apparent to them, a few years ago, I turned to the field and approached a group of mentoring teachers. I was interested in finding out what we could jointly design, that would allow for *conversations* in the mentor/candidate dyad and that would have a sharp focus on how this knowledge/stance can be nurtured. The intent of this work with the first group of seven teachers that came from one CPS site and had a collective number of 70 years of experience in mentoring teacher candidates, was to recount their particular conversations with their teacher candidates and how they pointed them to good, solid practice.

The second intent that became apparent during the course of the work was that in understanding the *relational ways of knowing* (see, Gallego, Hollingsworth, & Whitenack, 2001) between school and university folks—as such, with the formation of a *teacher educator community*—we engaged in dialogic, collaborative, helpful, if uncharted aspects of teacher preparation. My contention is that tuning into the tacit knowledge of teachers who serve as mentors to our students, the task for us as teacher educators is to figure out how to continue to pull close to these practitioners and establish ways of communication in order to appreciate and learn from their knowledge. This was precisely the case with the design of a tool called *The Development of Ethical and Caring Actions in Urban Teaching (DECA-UT)*. As it now stands, the tool was refined and re-articulated by a second group of mentoring teachers, all of whom share the *inter-generational* quality alluded to earlier. *The DECA-UT* is currently being used in our programs and it assesses candidates’ dispositions, sensibilities, and deliberate actions in urban teaching.

This work, that is examined fully elsewhere (Katsarou, 2010), was a deliberate effort to include *mentoring teacher knowledge* in the way in which a teacher preparation program assesses and develops candidates’ requisite and developing dispositional knowledge. This joint effort delivered a practical tool that directly addresses recent calls to be clear and intentional as to what is essential and prone to development in novice, urban teachers. Additionally, the work with the teachers in this new condition points to teacher preparation coupled with the inclusion of practicing urban teachers’ knowledge and the emergence of more involved alliances with our partners in urban

schools that, in the case of UIC, bears the added characteristics of the *inter-generational and inter-institutional* approach to teacher preparation.

I am well convinced that the relationships that exist between colleges of education and those urban schools/spaces that are intentional about the work they do with under-served students and communities are central in our developing teacher candidates who will engage in deeply caring, ethical, and socially and politically relevant teaching. The school folks and us—both teachers/instructors and teacher candidates—are in a relationship that is reliant first on our common and deep caring for urban youngsters in our public schools and second on our numerous political conversations that have revealed to us that we have very similar understandings of what constitutes praxis in education. Both of these common visions on education are, of course, the very *reasons for* our relationship. More interestingly, these common visions on education have given us permission to muster our strength and attempt to understand our own struggle in making explicit to aspiring teachers what it is that they need to know and understand about urban students and teaching; our trust that some of them will succeed eventually, while others do not have what it takes; our insistence that deep and caring urban teaching begins with deep and caring relationships with and *in* urban sites that face all the sclerotic and insensitive systems of schooling and learning. I find that in recognizing and acknowledging the systemic recalcitrance, teacher educators and school folks can build unshakable alliances and trust in one another. As this mutual respect and trust are considered, it is important to examine how these impact teacher education and fieldwork placements. In the work I have been doing with Lance School and in the work around the *DECA-UT* as well as in other urban sites over the years, what has become abundantly clear is that unless we view the relationship between teacher educators and the schools people as critically important and decisive, our candidates' development will remain partial and decontextualized.

Part Two:

New York City—Challenging Deficit Paradigms in Pre-Service and First-Year Teachers

The following section examines how teacher candidates and alumni from a dual certification program in New York City develop these attributes through their on-site work at a local public school. Examining this work through a variety of entry-points, from student teaching on site to having teachers and students from the school teach on campus to partnership projects that bring together teacher candidates, students and their families on site, this section provides concrete examples of efforts of teacher education to prepare social justice educators.

Discussed in earlier sections, deficit thinking can only be interrupted when brought to the teaching candidates' attention, as the candidates are often unaware that they are not seeing their students as whole people. As the teacher educator who

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supervises student teachers at a New York Public School, I created the Child Connection Assignment as an attempt to help move teacher candidates away from deficit thinking toward becoming advocates for students. The teacher candidate begins by identifying a student with whom she struggles to connect with to observe. The candidate writes up an observation of this child as well as an “empathy journal” in which she writes from the child’s perspective in order to try to imagine how the child is experiencing the classroom. Before turning this in, the class examines a write-up from a former teacher candidate that is riddled with deficit descriptions of a student who is presented as nothing but a list of problems. The current candidates identify examples of “deficit” thinking, a term which is introduced in seminar. They return to their own write-up, identifying their own moments of deficit thinking, and reframe these sentences to present their students in less judgmental terms. For example, candidates may reframe “Darnell is uninterested in learning” to “During read-aloud, when most students are looking at the teacher, Darnell is playing with his shoelaces.” By focusing on the behavior rather than labeling the student, the teacher candidates begin to move away from making sweeping assumptions about their children. After reflecting on what they notice about themselves and how they observe children, the candidates work on developing a personal connection with their assignment student. Finally, they write letters to the students future teacher, advocating for the student and identifying strategies that could help this student in their future classroom.

When the teacher educator asks the candidates to move from seeing only deficits to recognizing the whole child and their strengths, candidates are in a better position to be able to develop solidarity with their students’ communities. Teacher educators must hold up a mirror to the candidates we prepare, helping them to recognize the potentially dangerous conceptualizations they may hold about their students and explicitly helping them to reframe their stance to that of solidarity and advocacy. Rethinking “expertise” for solidarity and empathy

Traditional teacher education and professional development is designed on the banking model (Freire 1993); train the teachers on discrete skills and methods so that they can replicate them in the classroom. This model sets up a paradigm in which teacher candidates internalize that only “experts,” professors, curricular program vendors, and the like have knowledge that is valuable for preparing them to teach. By disregarding other educators, parents and students as potential “teachers,” candidates are cut off from a knowledge base that can prepare them to be responsive to the needs of the urban communities and students they will teach.

To shift this paradigm, education programs need to rethink who is in a position to educate teachers. By bringing in recent graduates who are new teachers, parents, and children to campus to lead classes, candidates are able to set up a pattern of tapping into alternative bases of expertise. It also helps to shatter the myths of what social justice topics teachers can address and how students respond to such material. For one such project, I invited my recent graduates who taught at the school in which I supervise student teachers to come back to campus. They

taught the current candidates about how to integrate social justice curriculum, specifically a book called *Leon's Story* about a sharecropper in the South, into the mandated curriculum. Hearing that this was possible in a first-year teachers classroom transformed the candidates concerns that they would have to wait until they were tenured to begin this kind of teaching:

Since the beginning of class, I have questioned the possibility of including books such as *Leon's Story* in a curriculum and have always been afraid to “go against the tide” of the general curriculum. Because some of my classmates knew you [the current teachers] and knew that you were in our positions only a few months ago, it helps us believe that we can do it too. *It is possible to start this work as soon as I start teaching!*

First-year teachers, typically thought of as having little experience or knowledge to offer, actually bring a great deal to the table as teacher educators of people about to enter the classroom for the first time.

Later in the semester, these teachers returned to campus, this time with their fifth-grade students who lead a panel discussion on the role of race and racism in the South. Positioned as experts, the students spoke about complex issues of historical and current racism. This prompted the teacher candidates to quickly rethink their assumptions about what kind of content younger students can handle. As one candidate expressed to the first year teachers, “Hearing your students talk with such confidence and comfort about the topic of racism shows that you guys have built a very strong foundation and a safe environment for them to discuss such a serious and heavy topic.” In more recent years, parents have also presented on the panel, sharing their thoughts on their students learning about such topics. One parent explained that racism is a part of their life and so they are glad to see teachers address it in school, dispelling the candidates’ fears that parents would be angered by addressing social issues.

By being exposed to non-traditional “experts” within their traditional teacher education program, teacher candidates can tap into knowledge that they may not have otherwise learned from. This positions them to teach for social justice because they can begin to see other educators, students, and parents as people from whom they need to learn. By interrupting the “missionary” orientation many candidates enter with, they can no longer see themselves as saviors when they recognize the strength, wisdom, and contributions of those around them. Without this mindset, teachers developing solidarity with urban communities is highly unlikely.

Developing Empathy, Solidarity and Their Role in Social Change to Recognize and Act upon Community Concerns

In order to teach for social justice, teacher candidates must recognize issues and concerns that affect their students and the communities in which they teach, and they must have the mindset that by working in solidarity with communities,

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they can do something about it. The school in which I supervise student teachers is located in a community of color that is experiencing rampant gentrification. In fact, the mayor recently revealed a major redevelopment effort for the local waterfront that is currently a community-used space. Traditional teacher education would not address this issue in preparing teachers to teach there, but rather would focus solely on the mechanics of teaching. In order to help candidates recognize the impact this could have on the community, I used this issue to shape their student teaching experience.

The first step in this process was to help the candidates become aware of the issue and familiar with grassroots efforts to have community input in the redevelopment issue. I invited two local community organizers to the school during our onsite seminar to inform the candidates and their cooperating teachers of the 1st and 3rd grade classrooms about their campaign to bring community voice into the redevelopment efforts. We then created an integrated unit on gentrification of the waterfront and developed projects that allowed the children to participate in the organizations' ongoing campaign. The project culminated with a publishing party in which the students read their persuasive essays to the Economic Development Corporation in charge of the redevelopment to their families, who were then invited by the organizers to participate in a community rally that week. Through this semester long project, the teacher candidates became aware of this issue facing the community, collaborated with local grassroots organizers to become aware of how change happens, and developed academically rigorous lessons to introduce their students to gentrification and activism. By shifting the focus of the onsite teacher education class, a collaborative partnership emerged that raised the awareness of the candidates to local issues and their role in creating change with their students and families.

Subtle Subversion: Developing and Integrating Social Justice Themes into Mandated Mainstream Curriculum

Once teacher candidates move from deficit thinking to wanting to teach in solidarity with their students, they need to acquire specific skill sets in order to move from theory to practice. Teachers in neoliberal contexts face a number of barriers to implementing culturally relevant and social justice oriented curriculum in their classrooms. From standardized curriculum to high stakes testing, many schools have virtually every minute dedicated to a particular mandated program, particularly in low-income communities of color. Many candidates complain that they want to teach from a social justice perspective, but that there is no way for them to accomplish this. Teacher educators must help them to reveal the cracks in the brick walls created by neoliberal policies so that teachers can implement the kind of pedagogy that is in service to the communities in which they teach.

By building on teacher candidates' developed skills of identifying student and community needs, the teacher alumni at the local school in which I supervise

recognized the need for their students to be provided with health education. After a 5th grader brought in a tub of frosting for lunch, the teachers decided to begin a health education unit. Because these were my former candidates, and they had an ongoing relationship with their teacher education program, we decided to create a partnership between the school and university for this project. The neighborhood in which the school is located provides limited access to healthy, organic food. The closest green market is avenues away, and the only healthy item sold at the bodega on the corner are the few bottles of water buried under rows of soft drinks. The project began with the 5th grade teachers coming to campus to brainstorm the unit with the cohort of 40 seniors in the undergraduate teacher education program. The current teachers explained what their upcoming mandated math and literacy units were and together we developed enduring understandings and essential questions. Two candidates in the cohort were also the student teachers in the 5th grade classes, and they were able to teach most of the ensuing lessons that integrated math, nutrition and writing. Culminating in a “Healthy Choices Festival”, the entire cohort of teacher candidates worked at the elementary school with the 5th graders preparing healthy and inexpensive snacks for their families in a “Top Chief” style event.

In their coursework, the candidates learned how to create thematic units that integrate the needs of the community with academic skills. By working with the current fifth grade teachers, they saw first hand how to integrate an identified need, health education, with the mandated reading and writing and math curriculum. By holding class onsite, the candidates moved away from the theoretical planning of lessons common in teacher education, and implemented these lessons with actual students. The festival generated excitement and capacity at the elementary school to hold the after school festival. By providing the candidates an opportunity for hands-on practice integrating social issues with the mandated curriculum, teacher education can prepare our candidates to implement what they have learned with the context in which they will teach.

***Developing Communities of Support
to Grow and Sustain Social Justice Teaching***

In order to continue to develop as social justice educators and sustain their commitment as they enter the field, graduates need to participate in ongoing communities of support. Teachers who enter the field specifically with the hopes of working toward social change are often the first quickly to leave the profession as they find themselves alienated and alone while trying to navigate highly political terrain (Miech & Elder, 1996). Preparing educators for urban settings is not enough. If teacher education wants to truly honor its commitment of providing educators who can teach in solidarity with their communities, we must continue to support our graduates as they struggle through the difficulties of beginning to teach. New teachers need protection from hostile environments, practice developing curriculum, and a community of like-minded people who are going through what they are going through (Picower, 2011).

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An example of such a group is the Social Justice Critical Inquiry Group. The group, open to alumni from the undergraduate childhood program, meets on a biweekly basis to discuss issues they face in the classroom and to develop social justice curriculum. The participants are able to develop a safe space where they can push, support and learn from one another as role-models. The group reminds the members of why they went into teaching and keeps them true to their ideals. As one member shared what would have happened had she not participated:

I'd have quit teaching...[CIP] inspires me to keep being a teacher, because I know that you've got to start somewhere... I just see now that being a teacher is not about teaching this, this and this. It's about preparing our kids for being knowledgeable human beings that understand the way of the world, and to understand not just their cause and their situation, but all causes... It keeps me going, it definitely keeps me going.

With over 50% of new teachers leaving within the first five years, CIP has played a role in helping members put their vision of preparing human beings who understand the way of the world into practice. The satisfaction they gain by teaching with a purpose and being able to improve their craft in a community of peers kept them going.

Conclusion:

Embracing Justice, Solidarity, and Teaching as a Political Act

To truly teach in solidarity with schools and communities requires of teachers both specific mindsets and skill sets. Teachers need to develop empathy and see the strengths and assets of the students and communities in which they teach. Their classrooms must be in and of the community, blurring the boundaries between who teaches and who learns and the borders between schools and neighborhoods. It is critical that they are able to recognize the structural forces that impact their students' lives, and have the sense that they are in a position to act upon them. However, this approach to teaching and understanding of the role of the teacher is not enough; educators must also develop specific skill sets designed to help them use their classrooms as spaces in which to address community concerns. Given the neoliberal context of urban schools in which almost every minute of the academic day is geared towards preparation for tests or spent on a standardized program, teachers must be able to integrate social justice teaching into the mandated curriculum. Teachers should involve parents and community members as partners in these projects. Finally, it's essential that social justice educators find like-minded communities of support to sustain and deepen their efforts. If these are some of the mindsets and skill sets required to teach for social justice, we owe ourselves to develop ways in which teacher education programs can develop these qualities in their teacher candidates.

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