

Critical Educators at Work in Chicago: Connecting Students to Communities

by
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“Teaching can be an insurgent kind of project against the status quo. . . . It doesn’t have to be just a nice little corner of something, but it can be in opposition to injustice.” (W. Ayers personal communication, February 17, 2007)

There is an obvious political challenge when choosing to teach for social justice in higher education. Recently, professors have seen the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) remove the term *social justice* from their widely accepted professional teaching standards, saying it is “lightning rod” language that could trigger lawsuits (Meiners & Quinn, 2007). The removal of the term concerned academics who brought this action to the attention of the board of the major national research organization for education, the American Educational Research Association (AERA). When asked to give feedback to NCATE regarding this action, the AERA Board “voted against opposing NCATE’s deletions of social justice and sexual orientation” (Meiners & Quinn, 2007, p. 3). This sort of non-action is a political challenge for educators who choose to teach for social justice.

Not only do they face professional association passivity, but activist scholars are challenged publicly by conservative critics who question the intention of teaching for social justice. Applebaum (2009) points out that conservative critics have accused professors of influencing the morals and minds of their students to

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further their own liberal agendas. In the same vein, Horowitz (2006) in *The Professors: The 101 most dangerous academics in America* targets professors across the U.S. as "... radicals intent on making the university relevant to current events and to their own partisan agendas" (2006, p. x). *The Los Angeles Times* reported that a conservative UCLA alumni association offered students up to \$100.00 per class for taping lectures of certain UCLA professors "identified with left wing or liberal causes," naming them "The Dirty 30" (Hong & Silverstein, 2006, ¶ 2).

In spite of these daunting attacks in a time of change, there are still professors willing to persevere and "speak against injustice, exclusion and silencing, wherever they occur" (Meiners & Quinn, 2007, p. 4). This paper documents the voices of six such critical educators who are known as activists in their universities and communities in Chicago. Meiners and Quinn, two of the six activist scholars represented in this paper, challenged AERA 2006 meeting attendees to *Wear Red* in solidarity against NCATE's action and the AERA Board's decision. These Chicago professors and others in colleges of education are transcending a negative, political climate and constraining institutional expectations to blaze paths between their universities and their communities to promote and encourage their students to take responsibility for creating socially just schools and communities.

This paper is based on a qualitative study we designed to discover how professors in colleges of education teach, research, and serve as they carry on their work for social justice. The study was grounded in our collaborative work as researchers and educators for social justice in universities over the past several years. In our collaborative work, we sought to design pedagogy to help students taking our courses to deepen their thinking and insights into issues of social justice. We found that with the introduction and use of specific pedagogical tools, students in our courses began to construct their own meanings of how school and community practices can be just or unjust. And then once these meanings were constructed, we asked our students how they might take responsibility for creating more socially just schools and communities, moving from understanding and insight to action (Katz & Ryan, 2005).

Toward a Theoretical Framework

To develop the theoretical framework for research into classroom pedagogy, we drew from best practices and theories in our disciplines and created a three-pronged framework of constructivism, critical thinking, and systems design. We were most interested in defining social justice for classroom teaching that supports what Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, and Peterson (1994) call "a social justice classroom" (p. 4), a laboratory for creating a more just society. They believe educators should *confront* rather than perpetuate race, class, gender, and other inequities in our society that help shape children's lives. Their eight components of the equitable, socially just classroom are: grounded in the lives of stu-

dents; critical; multicultural, antiracist, pro-justice; participatory and experiential; hopeful, joyful, kind and visionary; activist; academically rigorous; and culturally sensitive (p. 4).

We find it easy to weave these interlocking components of a social justice classroom into our framework of constructivism, critical thinking, and systems theory. Constructivism is a concept in education that supports the claim that learning is enhanced when it is *grounded in the lives of students* and calls for the classroom to be part of the learner's participation in real experience, i.e., participatory and experiential. The socially just classroom is *critical*, which means that the curriculum should "equip students to talk back to the world" (Bigelow et al., 1994, p. 4). When developing a socially just classroom, Bigelow et al., (1994) argue that the classroom should help students connect the subject(s) to their lives in the broader society with its potential limitations. They say classrooms should be places where students question, challenge, make real decisions, and collectively solve problems.

In our early pedagogical work, we concluded that with the introduction and use of specific pedagogical tools, students deepened their thinking and insight into social justice issues in connection to their own communities. We found evidence that our students began to question their belief systems regarding the key socially constructed categories we focused on: gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and disability.

We identified an array of instructional tools and strategies that could be combined in different ways for the course and context that would broadly contribute to student consciousness and action for social justice. We adjusted our teaching practices based on what we learned from our students regarding how useful the pedagogical tools were in our classrooms. To further improve our practice, we sought to find out how other professors were teaching, conducting scholarship, and serving for social justice. As a result of our research with activist scholars in Chicago, we came to understand that we are *working the dialectic*, a process to "theorize the relationship of inquiry, knowledge, and practice" (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 3). As researchers and practitioners, we work the dialectic when we generate knowledge and build theory through our own research and experiences. We continue to work the dialectic when we adjust our practices based on what we are learning and then we analyze those practices to adjust our theoretical approach. Cochran-Smith describes how working the dialectic with her colleague is a nonlinear process "more like improvising a dance than climbing a set of stairs" (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 3).

Our study of activist scholars has prompted us to look at our own practices and theoretical framework(s) as teachers and scholars. We discovered that the teaching, research, and service work of all six of our participants in this project is grounded in critical theory and connection to marginalized and disenfranchised communities. We came to understand that critical pedagogy is what links our work to the work of other activist scholars.

Critical pedagogy commits itself to forms of learning and action undertaken in solidarity with subordinated and marginalized groups. In addition to questioning what is taken for granted about schooling, critical theorists are dedicated to the emancipatory imperatives of self-empowerment and social transformation. (McLaren, 2007, p. 190)

When designing classroom processes and choosing pedagogy, we introduce tools that prompt student self-empowerment and potential social transformation. In similar ways, our participants prompt their students to consider the processes that historically and traditionally subordinate and marginalize groups. For example, one of the activist scholars who participated in our research, Rico Guts-tein, introduces his students to what he calls “a pedagogy of questioning” where he creates opportunities for students to raise their own questions, challenge, and disagree, even with him. As one of his students wrote in a letter of support:

We were always encouraged to speak up in class whenever we disagreed with him. He never pushed us to believe certain things, but instead challenged us to question everything, and we did. We not only questioned things going on in our own neighborhood and in the world as a whole, but we also questioned Mr. Rico. . . . That’s what he taught us, to question everything around us and not just to take somebody’s word on an issue—even if that meant not taking his. (Guts-tein, personal communication, May 14, 2007)

The concepts of solidarity with the disenfranchised and the goal of empowering all to critically evaluate and contribute to decisions that affect their lives must be at the heart of the activist scholar’s approach to social change. We came to realize that grouping best practices in our disciplines and compatible theoretical approaches into a framework was only the beginning of learning how we might teach for social justice. Thus, we continue the dialectical process of allowing our research practices to inform our theory and our theoretical changes to inform our practice.

Finding Critical Educators in Chicago

To identify participants in our study, we examined the mission statements of Chicago universities that have a social justice focus. Ultimately, the professors who agreed to participate in our study came from four Chicago universities – two public and two private. Table 1 shows the racial demographics of students, location and type of university (private or public), tuition of undergraduate education, and mission focus.

UIC and NEIU, the public universities predictably have the lowest tuition and largest enrollments. All four universities are predominantly White. UIC has more Asian students (19%) than the other universities. NEIU has more Hispanic students (25%), while RU has more Black students (21%). SAIC has the most foreign students (19%). Clearly, aside from predominantly White students, each

university attracts a specific racial population of students. University mission statements were similar in their focus on equity, diversity, social consciousness, and social justice.

Table 1: Comparison of Four Chicago Universities and Their Student Population

University Type	UIC Public Re- search 1	NEIU Public	RU Private	SAIC Private
Location	Near west	Northwest	South loop and North- west suburb	South loop
Size	25,000	12,000	7,000 +	3,000
UG Tuition (1 semester)	\$5,858.00 (state resi- dent)	\$4,008.00 (state resi- dent)	\$10,500.00	\$17,050.00
Race				
White	46%	49%	50%	53%
Black	8%	12%	21%	4%
Hispanic	14%	25%	9%	8%
Asian	19%	10%	5%	14%
Other	12%	4%	15% (undis- closed and other)	20% (19% for- eign)
Mission focus	. . . com- mitted to educational equity as it contributes to social, political, and economic parity.	. . . dedicated to excel- lence and innovation in education . . . teaching, research, and service efforts to the needs and aspirations of a diverse student body community.	. . . educat- ing socially conscious citizens for active and dedicated lives as lead- ers in their professions and their communities.	. . . prepara- tion of art educators as critical citizens who value visual cul- ture, cultural difference, democracy, and social justice. . .

Additionally, each university has unique characteristics. For example, the College of Education at UIC is predominantly graduate students (747 in 2008), in contrast to 104 undergraduates (UIC website, 2009). NEIU was recently ranked the most ethnically diverse university in the Midwest by the 2008 U.S. News &

World Report (NEIU website, 2009). Students at RU are almost equally split between full and part-time. The SAIC, according to their website, has an incredibly diverse community of faculty, staff, and students from all 50 states and over 40 countries.

Identifying the Professors and Interview Process

After looking at university mission statements, we looked at professors' websites, course syllabi, and other online documents. We identified faculty members who taught courses and had publications that focused on work for social justice. We interviewed each participant twice, observed their teaching using a structured template, and reviewed their documents. We structured our interviews around five trigger statements, beginning with a statement about what it means to pay serious attention over a long time to race, diversity, and social justice in teacher education. Cochran-Smith, 2004 says that each person must make their own path in addressing these issues. We then asked the participants to describe their own path, to talk about what centered or grounded them as they continued their work in their universities and communities, to define social justice, to describe specific pedagogical tools they believed worked well in teaching for social justice, and talk about any other relevant points.

We analyzed interview transcripts and other data for specific examples and themes and generated insights linking participants' work for social justice and critical pedagogy. We used a qualitative data analysis program, NVivo 7, to search the data for themes, nodes, and relationships. The program extracted relevant data from interview transcripts, field notes, researcher reflections, detailed notes of classroom observations, and participants' publications. Six themes emerged from our analysis: *The Three-Dimensional Citizen*: William (Bill) Ayers, *Empowering Advocacy*: Nona Burney, *Math in Socio-Political Context*: Eric (Rico) Gutstein, *Fraught with Tension(s)*: Erica Meiners, *Connecting the Landscape*: Therese Quinn, and *Critical Race Theory*: David Stovall.

Voices of Activist Scholars

This section gives voice to each of the six professor participants and describes how each struggles within their context to succeed as an educator for social justice. The focus here is limited to illustrate how these six professors make meaning of their backgrounds and experiences and how it leads to the critical pedagogy they weave into their work in communities and the classroom. This critical pedagogical connection creates the consistency that characterizes their work in teaching, research, or service. All of our participants gave us permission to use their names and those of their institutions.

The Three-Dimensional Citizen

According to the online faculty directory at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), William (Bill) Ayers is a school reform activist, Distinguished Professor of Education, and Senior University Scholar at UIC where he teaches courses in interpretive research, urban school change, and youth and the modern predicament. He is the founder of the Center for Youth and Society and founder and co-director of the Small Schools Workshop. He has written extensively about social justice, democracy, and education. His interests focus on the political and cultural contexts of schooling, as well as the meaning and ethical purposes of teachers, students, and families (UIC College of Education, 2009, Faculty Profile).

What this entry does not describe is Ayers' history as an activist and co-founder of The Weathermen, a 1960s radical, anti-war protest group. These early struggles for social justice, often distorted and misunderstood, not only influence how he is perceived, but translate into his teaching. Ayers refers to teaching as part of his activism. He discussed with us how his teaching career emerged from his activism when he was a student at the University of Michigan:

I had been arrested for a draft board sit-in. . . . and we got ten days in county jail. [There] I met a guy whose wife was a teacher in this Freedom School [in Mississippi] and went literally out of jail into my first teaching job and, in an odd way, that was both emblematic and foretelling because, from that moment to this, teaching has always been linked in my mind as a project for social justice. . . . And so for me this notion of education, social change and so on is hard wired because of my early experiences and how I came to teaching. (Ayers, personal communication, February 21, 2007)

The theme of *The Three-Dimensional Citizen* surfaces often in Ayers' work for social justice education. His view of all individuals as three-dimensional emerges from his early experiences working for social change:

If you are a community organizer and you are knocking on a door on the west side of Cleveland, what do you expect to find there? Well, you expect to find a three-dimensional citizen who has every reason to have a comment on a nuclear power plant and product waste, and the environment, and the police. That's what we assume when we are community organizers. We assume a profoundly democratic idea. I make that assumption in classrooms. Each student who walks in the door is a three-dimensional person. (Ayers, personal communication, February 21, 2007)

Ayers' ideas of teaching and the importance of the individual came together when he taught at the Mississippi Freedom School. According to Ayers (personal communication, February 21, 2007), Charlie Cobb, the developer of the freedom school concept, said that the "children in Mississippi have been denied the right to think for themselves about the world they inhabit and how they might change it." Ayers believes this injustice still exists:

That strikes me as such a profound statement about social justice. And frankly, here I am forty five years later and I still think it applies. If I change just one word, the children of the west side of Chicago have been denied many things. . . . The fundamental injury is that they have been denied the right to think for themselves about the situation they find themselves in and how they might change it. (Ayers, personal communication, February 21, 2007)

Ayers encourages his doctoral students at UIC to look for the dimensions and rights of individuals when conducting research and writing dissertations. In his syllabus for Advanced Studies in Qualitative Research Methods, Ayers wrote:

Our focus is life as it is *lived*, meaning as it is *constructed* by people in their circumstances—something not easily fitted into disciplines or departments. This leads us to story, to narrative, to life history—approaches that are person-centered, unapologetically subjective. Far from a weakness, the voice of the *person*, the subject's own account, is the singular *achievement* of this work. (Ayers syllabus, 2006)

In this same qualitative research class, we observed Ayers attempt to demystify the dissertation process for students and help them think about the social constructions and contradictions inherent in all research participants. He admonished his students, saying, “Don’t run away from the contradictions—[this is] where the luminous spots are. . . . [the] messy reality of walking through real life” (Ayers, class observation, March 13, 2007).

Clearly, Ayers’ past experiences of protest against inequities and his work as an activist have shaped the critical pedagogy he uses in his classrooms. He challenges his students to struggle with self-education and “to demonstrate to [their own] students by daily effort and interaction that they are valued, that their humanity is honored, that their growth, enlightenment, and liberation are core concerns” (Ayers, 2007, p. 4).

Empowering Advocacy

Nona Burney is Associate Professor of Secondary Education and Academic Director of The Center for Teaching and Learning at Roosevelt University, Chicago. She received a B.S. in Education from Northwestern University, an M.S. in Urban Studies, a Ph.D. in Urban Education from Cleveland State University, and a J.D. from Cleveland Marshall College of Law. Burney’s interests are in public school reform, transformational leadership, and parental involvement in education. Burney created the course, *Teaching for Equity and Social Justice: Non-Western Perspectives in the Classroom*, which she teaches to pre-service secondary school teachers. She is a board member of the Mansfield Institute for Social Justice at Roosevelt and a member of the Grand Boulevard Federation Education Committee in Chicago (Roosevelt University, 2009, Burney Faculty/Staff Directory).

Burney's entry in the directory specifically makes mention of her "raison d'être" as a faculty member in the College of Education.

I am a teacher. Sometimes I add modifiers like 'teacher educator' or 'teacher scholar,' but at my core, I am a teacher. Which comes to my 'raison d'être'—since children are the message we send to the future, I fully intend to be an instrument of their deliverance from non-, mal-, and mis-education. (Roosevelt University, 2009, Faculty/Staff Directory website, para 6)

The theme of *Empowering Advocacy* emerges from Burney's work with students in preK-12 schools, as well in her teacher education classes. During her 27 years as a teacher and administrator for the Cleveland Municipal School District, she also served as head planner for the Law and Public Service Magnet High School. While there, she facilitated the development of unique social studies courses in a program to help grades 9-12 students "know what the world was like and apply what they were learning" (Burney, personal communication, June 27, 2007). These students developed a sense of community where "the students understand upfront that they had to be responsible for their own learning and they were as responsible for the environment in the school (Burney, personal communication, June 27, 2007). Burney says that by "Putting children in powerful positions—to me that's part of social justice too—the idea of empowering people to be advocates for themselves and advocates for education" (Burney, personal communication, June 27, 2007).

Burney uses alternative resources that might be controversial to raise consciousness among her students in preservice secondary education courses. She wants her students (many who are White and suburban) to think critically about their own privilege in preparation for their careers as teachers in diverse classrooms.

I want them to be able to take the role of plays and stories and narratives that are in the text, [Rethinking Globalization] and use them in their classroom and share that perspective in the classroom. . . . look at those places where they do have power and/or influence and begin talking about what they've learned. . . . Most of them were surprised about White privilege – that's a place to start (Burney, personal communication, June 17, 2007).

Burney's effort to raise students' self-awareness and self-empowerment was evident in observing two class sessions during her summer intensive course, *Teaching for Equity and Social Justice: Non-Western Perspectives in the Classroom*. Although the course was taught on the Chicago campus, most of the students came from the suburbs and many said they had not spent much time in the city. She said many students were fearful of encounters they might have riding the train into the city. This was a surprise to her but was consistent with her insights into the challenges new teachers face in the urban environment. In her 2004 article, *An African American Woman's Dilemma: Preparing Anti-Racist Teachers*

for the 21st Century, she wrote about her own teaching challenges in helping her students address and recognize their fears.

Burney gave an example about having her pre-service teachers present work to authentic audiences:

We drafted a letter [to legislators] talking about the importance of social studies and how it should be in their goal to reauthorize [NCLB]—that social studies should be really considered. . . . I want you to be informed, I want you to reflect. I want you to generate your own knowledge. That’s what empowers. (Burney, personal communication, August 20, 2007)

Not only does Burney strive to empower students in her position as Academic Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Roosevelt University, but she wants to support faculty in their teaching, particularly advocating for the social justice mission of the university. She is at a “corner” in her career as she says:

The corner I’m turning has to do with improving teaching and learning. If we’re a teaching institution, then we need to do more that supports teaching. As Academic Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning . . . I’m interested in the idea of making social justice explicit here at Roosevelt rather than something that we run up the flag when we want people to pay attention to us. (Burney, personal communication, August 20, 2007)

Burney’s challenge has both peril and promise. As a Black professor, she feels responsible to prepare the “21st Century teaching force from candidates who are most likely to be White and female . . . to become anti-racist, pro-justice educators for all children” (Burney, 2004, p. 13). As a social justice activist, Burney brings her community experience in urban settings and her dedication to student self-advocacy as the foundation for designing critical pedagogy for her teaching.

Math in Socio-Political Context

Eric (Rico) Gutstein is Professor in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Illinois-Chicago. He received his PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1993. According to the UIC website, his research interests include mathematics education teaching for social justice and critical literacies in an urban, multicultural context, Freirean approaches to teaching/learning, and Chicago school policy:

I have taught mathematics for social justice in my own classroom in a Chicago public middle school and currently work with the Greater Lawndale/Little Village High School for Social Justice (also a public school). There I co-teach with and support the math teachers, help teachers and students develop/teach/learn from social justice mathematics projects, and work with a group of students who are co-researchers, public advocates, and spokespeople for teaching and learning mathematics for social justice. Together, we (teachers, students, myself) study

the process of creating a critical mathematics program for the school, focused on developing students' sociopolitical consciousness, sense of social agency, and their strong cultural/social identities. (UIC College of Education, 2009, Faculty Profile)

The theme of Math in the Context is reflected in what Gutstein believes about mathematics education. He says it is a way for students to study their social context and learn to be “active change agents for social justice . . . and where mathematics becomes an unexpected weapon in the struggle for social justice and equity” (Gutstein, 2007, p. 10–11). Gutstein referred to Freire to define social justice. “If you look at *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, it's the end of oppression and exploitation and it's towards liberation and full humanization” (personal communication, April 25, 2007). To explain exploitation, Gutstein used Marx's definition - the extraction of a person's value from workers for capital. Oppression, he explained, is found in institutional forms where institutions enact power over people and deny them the right to determine their full humanization and full expression of who they are. And liberation means the ending of exploitation and oppression and “the full right of people to determine for themselves their life choices, their plans, and their futures” (Gutstein, personal communication, April 25, 2007).

In his work, Gutstein argues that math educators should prepare future teachers to educate their K-12 students in urban contexts to question injustice and challenge oppression. In the syllabus for his course *Teaching and Learning Elementary Mathematics*, Gutstein's list of course goals concluded with the need “to develop a *critical consciousness*—to question and critique the sources and truthfulness of history, knowledge, and media representations; to connect social phenomenon to each other; to understand your own role and to use your voice to speak out and work for social justice” (Gutstein, syllabus, 2007, p. 1–2).

When we interviewed Gutstein, he was working on restructuring the undergraduate elementary education program at University of Illinois-Chicago. Gutstein talked about having pre-service teachers experience the neighborhoods where many of their future students live. He wondered if his students would get a better sense of what peoples' lives were like on a daily basis if they lived with families on the Westside of Chicago and were immersed in the community. “So they don't anthropologize, they don't romanticize, they don't demonize, and so they don't exoticize, all these things that people do when they don't know” (Gutstein, personal communication, April 25, 2007).

Gutstein asks inservice teachers to make their teaching culturally relevant and to become part of the school's community rather than perpetuating deficit thinking. In *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking* (1997), Valencia says the deficit thinking model asserts that “the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies,” such as “limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn, and immoral behavior” (p. 2). For Gutstein, culturally relevant teachers who understand this concept do not proceed

from a paternalism rooted in a deficit mentality. . . . teachers see their role as helping children move forward to reshape their world, potentially becoming leaders in their communities and in the broader society (Gutstein, Lipman, Hernandez, & de los Reyes, 1997).

For Gutstein, the concept of social justice is much broader than a just a physical act of social protest. He sees the mental grappling one must undertake, in or out of the classroom as valuable to any social justice activity:

So I hear teachers who say well, where's the action component in this social justice project? . . . I'm an activist, but I disagree with that formulation. It's like action may be for the person at that point in time, writing a paper—writing about and coming to grips with and chewing these ideas over. And even putting them on paper and reading them to other people in the classroom or getting in front of the classroom, and giving a tiny explanation of what they thought about this particular thing. . . . Action has to be seen that way. (Gutstein, personal communication, April 25, 2007)

Gutstein (2005) speaks directly to the peril and promise of the critical educator teaching for social justice in Chicago. Critical pedagogy is a challenging perspective that allows math education to be a vehicle for both teachers and their students to make sense of real world phenomena and ultimately make sense of their lived experiences. He says:

Teaching mathematics for social justice is not easy, nor uncomplicated. It is fraught with places where we can go wrong, and make mistakes. But we fundamentally have to take chances and live bravely in times like this, where there is both danger and opportunity in front of us. (p. 31)

Fraught with Tension(s)

Erica Meiners is Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Development and Women's Studies at Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago. She is the author of the book, *Right to be Hostile: Schools, Jails and the Production of Public Enemies*. She has co-edited, with F. Ibanez-Carrasco, *Public acts: Disruptive Readings on Making Curriculum Public*. She has published in *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, *Gender and Education*, *JAC: Journal of Advanced Composition*, and the *International Journal of Women's Studies*. Her work in the areas of prison/school nexus; gender, access and technology; community-based research methodologies; and urban education, has been supported by the U.S. Department of Education, the Illinois Humanities Council and the Princeton Woodrow Wilson Public Scholarship Grant, among others. Meiners works with the Domestic Violence Project at the Cook County Jail Women's Division; serves as a leader and a teacher at a Chicago adult high school for formerly incarcerated men and women; and is an active member of Beyondmedia Education, a Chicago

grassroots non-profit organization that produces media for social change (NEIU College of Education, 2009, EDFN Faculty).

The theme of *Fraught with Tension(s)* reflects the persistent tensions that arise from Meiners' participation in collaborative university-community initiatives in Chicago, especially in those organized against the existing prison system. This work makes her very aware of her privileged position as a professor moving in these community spaces. As an education professor working there, she is reluctant to even define herself as a social justice activist, particularly when working alongside a dedicated community organizer ". . . who doesn't know where he's going to get his next rent check" (Meiners, personal communication, April 5, 2007). The more involved Meiners has become in her work with community, the more conscious she has become of the complexity and dissonance inherent in working to bring together two very different systems.

As my investments – emotional, intellectual, professional and more – overlap and deepen, my attempts to negotiate and to move between these interrelated community and university spaces cause multiple kinds of persistent tensions. . . . I witness and participate in *partnerships* [italics in original] between community organizations and universities that are fraught with layers of tension: miscommunications, misunderstandings, and assumptions about resources, and more. (Meiners, 2004a, p. 162)

She alleviates some of these tensions by committing herself to long-term relationships with members of the community where she works outside the university environment. Meiners helped to found a high school on the Westside of Chicago for formerly incarcerated men and women and teaches there once a week. She talks about her commitment to her students and her accountability that she feels is both necessary to the meaning and the sustenance of the work:

These are people who I've known through either teaching or in the high school. I see people's kids. I know their grandmas and I know who's getting married. I know who's trying to have a baby. . . . I think it is accountability to people in communities that continues the movement. It's the relationships that stay, and you stay connected, but then it's the relationships and the accountability. I have access to resources through my university job. I have access to reading things, to going places. I feel a certain amount of accountability to use those spaces to move stuff along. (Meiners, personal communication, April 5, 2007)

A different sort of tension is generated in Meiners' urban university teacher education program. Her students are from working class neighborhoods in the city, and she wants them—particularly male students, who are reluctant to enter the field of teaching—to understand the realities of becoming teachers in Chicago:

When I teach the foundations course, there are people that are not necessarily in the college of ed. . . . They are thinking about it, but if they don't pass this class, they are not going to get in. . . . [I try] to get them through the hoops, but also

to give them connections to what is available in the city and what it might mean to reframe what counts as a teacher. We lose a lot of people, a lot of people of color, a lot of men, because their conception of what it means to be a teacher and to go through the pipeline is deadening. They don't see themselves there; they don't see their communities there. So, for me that means hooking up as much as possible with the community, bringing guest speakers . . . people I know, social justice people. (Meiners, personal communication, April 5, 2007)

In these undergraduate classes, Meiners attempts to “reframe people’s assumptions about what teaching means and what being a teacher is (Meiners interview, April 5, 2007). Typically, 80% of her teacher education students are female and White and many enter the program with the image of the White, lady teacher. “In my undergraduate classes we read, reflect upon, and discuss the intersections between femininity, whiteness, heterosexuality, and social class: the components of *Lady Bountiful*” (Meiners, 2002, p. 91).

There are other tensions that Meiners points out – tensions coming from students in classrooms who might judge a professor’s expertise on the basis of race and gender:

I have colleagues who are African American, who are women of color, and are much more under surveillance by the students. They are asked to be accountable to and present and perform the duties of a professor much more than I am. . . . I have male colleagues who can get away with more. No one’s crying about their hairdo on a weekly basis. . . . I think it’s so context specific. . . . In some ways, to be a black woman in a teacher ed classroom – that carries power; that has a certain kind of weight, value. But I also think that what they are held to versus what we [as White people] are held to is very different. (Meiners, personal communication, April 5, 2007)

She believes teachers should be prepared to provide learning environments where all students can be successful. To do this, pre-service teachers must question their own biases and assumptions. Meiners introduces students to intellectual tools, a theoretical toolkit that allows them to reflect on their own experiences. She described a scenario where students might reflect on the history of their neighborhood and then view the film, *Race: The Power of Illusion: Part 3*. Then, students begin to understand how the “FHA or redlining might have established restricted covenants – getting that vocabulary, a conceptual toolkit vocabulary that really allows students to connect their own experiences to a larger structure” (Meiners, personal communication, May 23, 2007). Meiners has found significant ways to challenge injustices and expose contradictions, both in her teacher education classrooms using critical pedagogy, in the community empowering adults who were formerly incarcerated with literacy skills, or when challenging policy stances of educational organizations and institutions.

Connecting the Landscape

Therese Quinn is Associate Professor of Art Education and Director of the BFA with Emphasis in Art Education Program at The School of the Art Institute, Chicago. She received her AA in 1977 from Sacramento City College; her BFA in 1988 from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago; and her MED in 1996 and PhD in 2001 from The University of Illinois at Chicago. She has developed exhibits at the Field Museum of Natural History and the Chicago Children's Museum. Her publications appear in *Youth & Society: A Quarterly Journal*; *Democracy and Education*; *Curriculum Inquiry*; and *Teaching for Social Justice: A Democracy and Education Reader*. A recent work is the co-edited *Handbook of Social Justice in Education* (2009). She is writing a book with Erica Meiners about the effects of privatization on queer teachers and students in public schools. Her on-going interests include educational equity and access in both formal (schools) and informal settings (museums), unsanctioned and resistant uses of public and private spaces, the effects of privatization on public schools, and the roles that art and artists play in social change for justice (Ayers, Quinn, and Stovall, 2009; School of the Art Institute, 2009, Faculty Bio).

Before her teaching position at the School of the Art Institute, Quinn worked in Chicago area museums developing exhibits. She said it is important to understand peoples' interests to better attract communities of color to museums. In her five years of working at Chicago's Field Museum on an Africa exhibit, she learned how communities of color, particularly African American communities, perceived museums:

They were very vocal about feeling disconnected from the museums, so hearing that over and over in these community forums really informed how I thought museums needed to do to be more responsible to the communities that visit them and pay for them through their city taxes. (Quinn, personal communication, February 21, 2007)

Quinn is strongly *connected to the landscape* of the city as an activist scholar and community member. She is currently serving her second term as an elected local school council member of Senn High School, a Chicago public school that serves students from 59 different countries speaking 46 languages. Recently, Senn has been at the center of a struggle to reconfigure this large school serving 1,200 students into four small schools. According to Quinn, local city politicians have "given Senn up to real estate developers that need a local, high status school to boost property values" (The Other Eye Blogspot, 2008, ¶ 10). Since 2006, Quinn has been maintaining a blog to focus the public on inequitable educational issues that occur locally, state-wide, and nationally.

Quinn also strongly *connects the landscape* of the city to her work as a professor. In her classes, Quinn tries to link theory to context, and believes theory is best when named and understood through specific places and situations. She has students read about and visit Chicago neighborhoods, and participate in class dia-

logue about the experience. Quinn says she “weaves in discussions about race, racism, privilege, White privilege, White supremacy, and make that a language that our students hear and at least recognize even if they don’t feel comfortable with it” (Quinn, personal communication, February 21, 2007). Quinn’s teacher education students research communities where they will student teach and then walk around these neighborhoods. She wants to create opportunities for her students to gain deeper insight into their future worlds. Students go into city neighborhoods with a set of guided questions: Do you feel comfortable in this neighborhood? Is this the first time you’ve been in this neighborhood with this population? What were the trigger points for you that seemed to make you uncomfortable? “Hopefully, some of the [post visit] conversations of racism emerge,” she says (Quinn, personal communication, February 21, 2007).

Quinn also challenges the larger academic community to address contradictions that exist in the educational system. Quinn, together with her colleague Erica Meiners, designed a campaign, which they titled “Accredit Love Not Condemnation.” Their campaign protested the fact that a state-wide teacher education conference was being held at an evangelical, Christian college where students are required to sign a community covenant as part of the admission application. According to Quinn and Meiners, the covenant equates “theft, murder, and rape” with “homosexual behavior.” In response to a letter on their blog from the college’s administrators, they expanded on why the requirement was a problem:

As lesbians, educators, and as citizens, we find this an insulting and dangerous comparison, and the kind of assertion that lays the ground for violence against LGBTQ people stating that teachers should respect and love all students, including GLBTQ students. (Quinn Blogspot, January, 2007, para 10)

Quinn engaged in this risky activity as an untenured professor at the time, ready and willing to organize and “act up” for social justice. In an on-going effort to make social justice advocates walk the talk, she calls for teacher education programs *not* to ignore gender, for critical pedagogues *not* to neglect to mention feminist and queer contributions to movements for educational justice, and for policy makers *not* to ignore or neglect the analysis of gender, sexuality, race, and power in their definition of academic success (Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009).

Critical Race Theory

David Omtoso Stovall is Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies and African American Studies at the University of Illinois-Chicago. He also works as a volunteer social studies teacher at the Greater Lawndale Little Village Social Justice High School. He received his PhD from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Stovall studies the influence of race in urban education, community development, and housing. His scholarship examines four areas: Critical Race Theory, concepts of social justice, the relationship between housing

and education, and the relationship between schools and community stakeholders. His work investigates the significance of race in the quality of schools located in communities that are changing both racially and economically. From a practical and theoretical perspective, his research draws from Critical Race Theory, educational policy analysis, sociology, urban planning, political science, community organizing, and youth culture (Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009; UIC/CEJE, 2009, faculty and staff bios; University of Illinois-Chicago, 2008, Faculty and Staff).

Stovall describes himself as a sociologist, but when preparing for his university classes as well as his high school classes, he draws from several disciplines, and from his work in Chicago:

I use a lot from philosophy, from urban planning, from sociology, and from gender and women's studies. How do all these different disciplines inform education? For me the different ways of knowing and doing is [through my] teaching high school social studies class. Different ways of knowing and doing is work with community organizations and teasing out this relationship between housing and education. . . . Chicago becomes so important in its relationship between housing, schooling, and school reform. (Stovall, personal communication, May, 16, 2007)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the overarching framework for Stovall's teaching, research, and service. He explained how CRT is "not just about individual bigotry," but about the validation of knowledge, particularly when teaching preservice teachers.

There are five things in critical race theory that we need to look at. First, racism as endemic to society; racism is a structural issue and it's not just about individual bigotry. The second piece is the validation of experiential knowledge. Knowledge of whoever is in the classroom space frames that validation – that expertise is critical. The third is challenging this traditional paradigm around [the concept of] deficit thinking. Not looking at what folks don't have, and can never have, or ever aspire to . . . And then this fourth piece about the commitment to social justice. . . . Not just us performing a service as teachers, but actually working in solidarity with the students in our classrooms. (Stovall, personal communication, June 26, 2007)

In *We Can Relate: Hip-Hop Culture, Critical Pedagogy and the Secondary Classroom* (Stovall, 2006b), Stovall described his attempt to develop relevant pedagogical practice in the humanities and social science secondary curriculum through hip-hop music in youth culture. He co-developed a Chicago public high school workshop as part of a class titled, *Society and Social Inequalities*, generated by his students' interests in hip-hop culture. Stovall's struggle was to make the learning relevant to the students and address the political, social, legal, and economic dynamics tied to these interests.

In another effort to address deficit theories that affect urban youth in schools, Stovall and a colleague facilitated a law class where they challenged high school

freshmen and themselves to reflect and think collaboratively about how their knowledge of the law affects decisions and how they move in the world (Stovall & Delgado, 2007):

Instead of ‘helping’ our students understand the function of the criminal justice system, we saw ourselves as standing in solidarity with our students as co-researchers throughout the development and implementation of the course. . . . By confronting the realities of young people coupled with our own experiences, we were constantly challenged to ‘make it all make sense.’ (p. 3)

In *School Leader as Negotiator: Critical Theory Praxis and the Creation of Productive Space*, Stovall (2004) asks school leaders to engage in “race praxis” and “get their hands dirty,” meaning that they must build relationships with their school communities and, in doing so, will ensure the safety and well-being of their students (p. 12). In this same article, Stovall suggests that school leaders could use Critical Race Theory as a project to navigate the spaces and realities of a racialized system and still foster a learning community.

Stovall’s role as a community organizer is linked to his role as an educator. He brings his community work and experience teaching in Chicago schools to his higher education classes. In an interview at a local online community cybercafé (Sims, 2007), Stovall said, “The justice mission of a professor at the University of Illinois-Chicago is to understand what’s happening in public schools; to put folks in those schools who have come from those neighborhoods because they want to be in those places.” Sims said he was shocked that Stovall was “allowed” to “talk black” and still be successful as a professor in the system. Stovall responded that UIC is a public university in the city of Chicago and therefore should be serving the city. He believes that since the population of teaching candidates is predominantly White women who will teach in Chicago where students are predominantly African American and Latino, he needs to be authentic. That authenticity means challenging preservice teachers and leaders to learn about and understand the city’s racial politics, especially as they extend to Black and Latino youth. Stovall claims that books are one thing, and education is another, there is education for survival, and education for transformation. When teachers and students make informed decisions, they can make drastic changes and these informed decisions have a drastic effect on their lives. He asked, “How do we understand our world and what do we do actively to change that, beginning with ourselves?” (Sims, 2007).

Conclusions

Although we identified themes in the stories of each individual participant, we also discovered four overall themes they held in common and that impact their critical pedagogy.

Knowing Oneself

All six activist educators indicate that change begins with knowing oneself, one's biases and assumptions, whether one is leading or participating, teaching or learning about social justice. In our interview with Ayers, he talked about an awareness of how his life experiences have given him a distinct confidence that he polices to avoid being perceived as arrogant. He asks himself, "Is my confidence a kind of superior confidence, saying I'm so much better than you, or is it a confidence that wants action, wants to move forward, but doesn't do it in the spirit of you are less than me?" His awareness has grown out of what he calls "bitter life experience" and has contributed to his understanding that the "whole world wasn't White and comfortable, and smug and sure of itself, and eating three meals a day and living with warm water, and that waking up was a bitter waking up as well as a hopeful waking up." He also realized that as a man, he experienced life sometimes differently than women and that could also be an arrogance. He told us that both realizations were an intimate part of his desire to be a revolutionary and fight against injustices in the system. We also saw that he encourages this self awareness in his classroom pedagogy. In *Embers of Hope: In Search of a Meaningful Critical Pedagogy* (2004a), Ayers said, "teaching against racism and against the status quo is never finished in a lesson or a unit or even a semester rather, it should be an ongoing, many-faceted project, part of the very fabric of the life of a classroom. ... as teachers we must continually remind ourselves that we are learners as well" (p. 126).

The other five professors share this critical self-examination. Gutstein told us that he recognizes his White male and class background comes with "some baggage" but his "centering is a hatred of oppression." Quinn's understanding of prejudice and what it meant to have a socially just world was sharpened with her mother's marriage to a Black man. "I was able to see racism in a way that maybe other people who were White and didn't have that kind of experience in their families weren't able to really see it" (Quinn, personal communication, February 21, 2007). In interviews with Meiners, she described her commitment to equity and justice issues as a seamless transition from her White working class background in Canada to her professional path of teaching, prison organizing, and working on anti-poverty issues. "My father was a Marxist, working-class, and I definitely got a commitment to equity and justice issues from both of my parents – my mother and my father. So it's always been a part of my life" (Meiners, personal communication, April 5, 2007).

Burney (personal communication, June 27, 2007) told us that what grounds her for the "fight" is her religious faith and family values. At age nine, she came home crying when someone called her Black. Her mother sat her down on a stool and said, "Look, what matters is what's inside of you." Her parents "laid the ground for us to be strong people, strong believers, and to do the right thing by other people and to have integrity in however we approach things." Stovall (per-

sonal communication, May 16, 2007) said that his suspension from kindergarten at age five initiated his understanding of what it was to be considered “inherently subordinate” as a person of color. He uses this personal example to prompt dialogue with his students when discussing unjust practices in schools. He believes that informed decision enables one to analyze and move forward in spite of constraints and barriers.

Knowing the Context

The activities of all six participants reveal that the social justice issues they address must emerge from the context authentically, whether in the community or the classroom. The work of Rico Gutstein and David Stovall are two such examples. Gutstein has been involved for over a decade designing and teaching math in context to middle and high school students. He developed a series of real-world projects using math as a key analytical tool where students investigated racism and other injustices. Gutstein (2009) believes that the purpose of teaching mathematics for social justice is to “create opportunities for youth to become participants in solving the real problems of their communities and change agents who will stand up and fight for justice using mathematics and every other means with which to do so” (p. 697). At the university level, Stovall encourages his students to wrestle with challenging questions about urban communities close to downtown that are undergoing change. He wants his pre-service students, who will most likely teach in Chicago Public Schools, to challenge the traditional language around school closings and ask who is being affected, what is happening in the communities, and who benefits from the change?

Accountability to Community

The six activist educators all consider themselves accountable to individuals in the communities where they work, teach, and conduct research. They continually work on that accountability, and it changes over time. Meiners discussed her issue with accountability several times during the two interviews we conducted with her. We asked her about the tensions between being an academic and a social activist. She mentioned that she and Therese Quinn have been talking about who professors are accountable to beyond the university for tenure expectations. They are searching for some ways to negotiate accountability “without being overly romantic or nostalgic, pretending to be down with the people when you’re not . . . [to] negotiate accountability to different kinds of communities that is [considered] respectable and ethical.”

Commitment to Action

All of the professors in our study are deeply involved and give substantial time to working with their Chicago communities for more *just* school practices and

policies. The commitment to action is the call we heard most consistently and strongly. Quinn sits on the Local School Council at a Chicago Public School and is the liaison for her university at the Multicultural Arts School, another small school in the complex of Little Village Lawndale High School. Meiners teaches at a school for formerly incarcerated adults who are studying for their GEDs. Guts-tein and Stovall co-teach with public school faculty at Social Justice High School, one of the four schools in Little Village Lawndale High School. Burney sits on the Grand Boulevard Federation Education Committee, a committee comprised of education advocates and stakeholders from community-based organizations concerned about gentrification in a large mid-south section of Chicago. Burney has been working on the committee to leverage information and resources and work together towards a common goal of improving schools to counteract planned school closings. Ayers is a nationally and internationally sought-after speaker and presenter on social justice issues and locally has taught youth at a juvenile detention center, among his other activities in Chicago.

Our six participants provide insights for like-minded professors of education who are willing to challenge the system and who, in solidarity with their students, find ways to teach and lead for social justice. Their willingness to share their busy work lives with us is one more example of teaching and leading for change. Our brief time with these six professors leaves us with ideas for our own practice as critical pedagogues, but it also raises many questions about the perils. How can we bring a community connection into our classes? How can those of us with professor privilege fulfill our obligation to challenge and nurture our students without seeking recognition or accolades for doing what Meiners says is our job? And ultimately, how can we develop the courage and commitment in ourselves and our students to act responsibly in concert with members of underserved communities?

As we seek to address these questions, we look to these six professors as models. Although we found our participants based on their *individual* profiles, most of them are working together on issues of concern in Chicago. We have found them presenting in forums and conferences together. Quinn was a panel member at Meiners' university that focused on the issues of militarization in Chicago Public Schools. Ayers, Quinn, and Stovall (2008) have recently edited a significant work, *Handbook of Social Justice in Education*. There is inspiration and motivation in finding others in one's world who think about teaching and education as a significant path to fundamental change. These six professors have persisted on the path in the struggle for equity and justice in education. The long-term success of this path is up to the rest of us.

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