

DISTINGUISHED SCHOLAR COMMENTARY

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It is my distinct pleasure to comment on the special issue of the *Journal for Leadership, Equity, and Research* entitled “Emancipatory Methodology for Social Justice in Education.” The contributors to this special issue admirably represent a large and influential cadre of scholars who continue to push the boundaries of social justice research and scholarship in the field of education. The work of this larger community of scholars is both ontologically and epistemologically diverse; that is, notable variations exist in theoretical perspective, research methodology, the role of research participants and the nature of their knowledge.

We also find divergence in how race, class, and gender, as sociological units of analysis, are positioned vis-à-vis the other; while some scholars articulate the racialized construction of power as predicated upon the political economic imperatives of capitalism, other scholars position race as the necessary and central unit of analysis across legal, educational, and social policy studies. No doubt, however, that most scholars within the realm of social justice research in education share a common interest in how race, class, and gender amalgamate in complex ways to produce the distinct experiences and actions of students, parents, teachers, administrators, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

I propose here that this diverse community of scholars finds further cohesion in the shared paradigm of scholar-activism, which challenges the false binary between the academy and political activism, or in different terms and more specifically, the perceived incompatibility of *research and scholarship* with active engagement with those working to radically alter the schooling experiences of students from oppressed communities. Scholar-activism begins with the premise that all research is imbued with political interests and power struggles set within the context of racialized, patriarchal, and class-based forms of domination.

While research, including educational research, is charged with pursuing valid and reliable truths as well as testing distinct knowledge claims, it can certainly do so with full transparency regarding its political investments. Can any form of educational research be deemed admissible if it masks its commitment to neoliberal economic values and to a White, hegemonic worldview, including the portrayal of the “deficitized other”? No matter the insights we may gain from new research endeavors and stimulating policy debates, scholar-activism warns us that reform-oriented research come to naught if we stir clear of how the school system perpetuates forms of organization that leave class, racial, and gender hierarchies in society more entrenched than ever.

In the realm of educational research, scholar-activism makes explicit its unmasking function. Whereas the dominant ideology asserts that public schooling embodies the inherent function to advance the promise of greater equal opportunity, the paradigm of scholar-activism strives to unmask the many ways that public schooling is put at the service of social inequality

and continued coloniality. In the realm of research that examines the educational experiences of students of color from working-class and poor communities, scholar-activism asserts its capacity to be an important contributing force for social change in society. While attentive to their diverse methodologies, scholar-activists in the area of public education embrace their integral role in understanding, critiquing, and, ultimately, changing the multiple axes of oppression as they operate within the public school system.

True, many education researchers desire that their scholarship contribute in some meaningful way to change in schools that serve the dispossessed. Indeed, many such researchers are quite eloquent in their advocacy on public forums. Scholar-activists, however, envision an even bolder role, even in the face of the academy's hegemony. Gramsci (1971) proposed that "The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist of eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor [and] organizer, as "permanent persuader," not just simple orator. Gilmore (1993) refers to the work of scholar-activism as "organic Praxis" (p. 73), or more simply, "talk-plus-walk." Tilley and Taylor (2014) paraphrase Gilmore's challenge in this way:

[The 'talk' refers to] the organization and promotion of ideas and bargaining in the political arena. The 'walk' refers to the ways that academics are able to politically advocate for others as they work to transform oppressive structures, support those in marginalized positions, and identify subjugated knowledge.

How scholar-activists actually do the 'walk' varies considerably, with their activities often determined by the restrictions placed on them by the niche they occupy in the academy.

Scholar-activists ply their trade within an academic environment that creates an artificial divide between intellectualism and action; intellectualism and theory-building get rewarded, *praxis* does not. However, as Katz-Fishman and Scott (2005) argue, "theory and practice are two aspects of a powerful, dialectical unity born out of and continuously tested in our social struggle to end all forms of exploitation and oppression. Neither can exist without the other." Echoing the philosophy of Paulo Freire, Katz-Fishman and Scott go on to state that social transformation must recognize that "the analytical and methodological tools of social analysis are not the 'private property' of academics and the academy" (2005, p. 373).

Scholar-activism is certainly not for the faint of heart, for it requires satisfying the dictates of the academy while wrestling against its stranglehold on emancipatory methodologies, particularly those that require a partnership approach to research. In the realm of education research, such an approach strives to equitably involve research participants in all aspects of the research process, from contributing expertise and local knowledge to sharing in the decision-making. Research participants, whether they be students or community members, are recognized for their ability to engage in social analyses of the world's injustices through stories of their "truths, trials, triumphs, and life lessons" (Mireles-Rios, Rios, Auldridge-Reveles, Monroy, and Castro, this issue). The goal is the generation of new knowledge that benefits and empowers students and community members, and that ultimately, enables students to seize their education as a vehicle to become social change agents in society.

The articles, each in its own way, mirror the values and the vision inherent in scholar-activism and in emancipatory methodologies. James S. Wright and Roya Tabrizi explore a federally-funded *turnaround* project initiated in 2013 in a Northeastern school district, a policy-implementation that relied on near-comprehensive mayoral control. The study utilized discourse and document analysis, interviews, and a life history methodology to capture the perspectives of educators, local politicians, and Black and Latinx community activists during the turnaround

implementation. Their careful analysis suggests that reformist policies--intended to ameliorate the effects of institutionalized racism--can reproduce much of the inequity when implementation excludes the active political participation of parents, community members, and even school board members invested in the community.

Jaime E. Welborn and Randall B. Lindsey present another case study of a school district's intervention efforts, though here we see an intentional and enlightened journey by the district to become anti-racist and culturally proficient. Welborn and Lindsey stress, as do Wright and Tabrizi, that attempts at school restructuring likely fail when the curriculum and classroom pedagogy continue to reflect values and behavioral norms of the dominant, racialized classes in society, particularly those entrenched cultural perspectives that view the language and culture of minoritized communities in deficit terms. Using the Framework for Cultural Proficiency, educators and other stakeholders in the district developed a common language and theoretical lens for advancing authentic student empowerment. Such a framework enabled educators to better understand how race and class can converge to create alienating learning environments; it also guided them in developing forms of pedagogy that seize upon the culture and language of students and their families as assets and as essential constituents of academic success.

The article by Mireles-Rios, Rios, Auldridge-Reveles, Monroy, and Castro provides another inspiring account of an intervention that replaces the focus on what students lack with a focused appreciation of the wealth of knowledge and experiences students bring to school. In the spirit of scholar-activism, the article describes the authors' interactive roles as scholars of color, activists, and researchers. The employment of these dynamic roles began with the development and implementation of an experimental six-week intervention program designed for youth "pushed out" of school, followed by a study and analysis of the program and its outcomes. Essential to the intervention, entitled *Project Grit*, was the facilitation of students' "counter-stories of self," or the sharing of personal stories of struggle, self-affirmation, and survival in the face of oppressive circumstances.

Shared in the context of relations of trust with facilitators and peers, students take their turns in retelling stories that reveal not only feelings of marginalization and despair, but also a keen awareness of the world's injustices, and an ability to accentuate their own courage, dignity, and hope for the future. Mireles-Rios and her colleagues stress that such storytelling can serve to activate a collective energy that leads to "positive feelings of belonging, purpose, [shared] accountability," as well as the possibility of civic engagement and leadership within their community.

The article by Yuliana Kenfield corresponds well with the work of Mireles-Rios and colleagues, mainly by highlighting the preparatory *cultural work* scholars-activists of color might consider as they reenter their own native community, either for purposes of research, intervention, or both. Kenfield, a native-Quechua scholar trained in the United States, describes her fieldwork with Andean college students in Peru and the implementation of a Photovoice project. Photovoice (PV), a methodology associated with Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), was developed to assist marginalized peoples to document their life experiences and to comment on the social and political forces that influence those experiences.

Kenfield's interest was about how Quechua-college students in the city navigate across two cultural-linguistic, sometimes conflictive worlds, and amidst the intersection of city identities and the rural Quechuan world. She describes how these students came to understand the necessity of building trust and solidarity among themselves *via* Quechuan-based ceremonies and practices—before PV-picture-taking sessions could take place. However, the use of

Quechuan-based ceremonies and practices had to include, even guided by, rural [mountain] Quechuan people and elders. This meant deference to Quechuan elders and a deep valorization of their culture. It also included being subjected to the elders' criticism for their assimilation, including how "professionals in the city" often treated rural indigenous people.

Finally, the four articles that make up this special issue are rounded off by two provocative book reviews. The first by Miguel N. Abad of the book, *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism and Schooling in San Francisco*, authored by Savannah Shange (2019) and the second by Marina Lambrinou of the book, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*, authored by Jason De Leon (2015).

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