

Are We Really ‘bout that Life’? Urban Educators as Activists in, and for, their Urban Schools’ Community

Keith E. Benson

Camden City School District

Witnessing urban American society on the cusp of configurational change during the turn of the century—with northern urban centers experiencing an influx of newly arriving persons from southern and eastern Europe, Latin America, and black people from the South—Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* pondered the best ways in which to synthesize educational methods and activities to educate a new American public.

In response to swift demographic change, Dewey noticed that the methods through which public education was historically administered would not be suitable to this new and evolving American school setting. Dewey understood schools ought not teach the same things to very different people in a uniform fashion. Instead, he recognized that communication between schools, teachers, and students must induce an educative experience for all. Dewey wrote:

Persons do not become a society by living in physical proximity, any more than a man ceases to be socially influenced by being so many feet of miles removed from others...If, however, they were all cognizant of the common end and interested in it so that they regulated their spe-

cific activity in view of it, then they would form a community.¹

This “great community” remains a goal for all those interested in social justice today. Since the ascension of neo-liberalization over cities and public education systems, capstoned with the election of Donald Trump as president, the responsibility for educators to forge a sense of community in the face of such public uncertainty is imperative. Over the past few years, with increased attention being dedicated to police violence against the vulnerable, the expanded criminalization of black and brown girls (both in and out of schools), sustained mass incarceration, the poisoning of water in Flint, sustained deportation of immigrants from Latin America and Islamic nations, and issues of gentrification and displacement in urban centers across America, urban educators today are presented with urgent and necessary opportunities to engage with, and advocate for, the diverse and marginalized communities in which they teach.

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Often armed with greater economic resources, a functional linguistic compatibility with Power, as well as greater access to decision-makers and knowledge of the mechanics of Power, urban teachers are uniquely positioned to aid their school’s surrounding com-

¹ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916/1997), 360.

munity in ways many urban residents simply cannot. Given that teaching is inherently political, educators are either consciously fighting oppression and marginalization, or, as Paulo Freire explained, passively sustaining it.²

For urban educators looking to be agents of positive change, we need only look outside our classroom windows for abundant opportunities to practice needed, meaningful activism. And although urban educators often adopt a position that says we are effecting change simply by teaching the next generation of potential leaders and social justice fighters, it is quite possible that we could and should be doing much more. We should be participating in the world outside the school: with, and on behalf of, the communities where we urban educators work.

The aim of this special issue of the Journal of School and Society is to explore the ways in which urban teachers can both be and become advocates for social justice beyond the schoolhouse. Expansive literature explores the often divergent backgrounds and lived experiences between urban teachers, their students, and the communities in which they work. What is less explored is the concept of urban educators acting as agents for societal change—beyond the walls of the classroom, as they seek to combat oppressive conditions present in the communities where they teach—for the betterment of the community.

Some guiding questions this special issue seeks to explore are: In economically and sociopolitical depressed urban areas, is teaching enough? What responsibility do urban educators have to the schools' surrounding community? How can teachers help urban community members in their struggle to achieve social justice and equity? What are the possibilities for increased partnership between urban educators and urban residents for unified advocacy? What

do urban communities expect of their teachers as partners in community-based struggle?

Exhibiting Herculean efforts to tackle such broad and consequential question, this issue includes perspectives from educational practitioners as well as education and urban studies researchers attempting to illustrate the need for, possible approaches of, and inspiring examples of urban educators being truly about that

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“change agent” life.

In our first section of this issue, Lois Weiner explores what the current American milieu signifies for educators and researchers who work in, and with, low-income communities of color. She explains that our professional responsibilities ought to emerge from an understanding that urban educators face an intensification of policies that harm students, their communities, and their schools. Weiner suggests urban educators propose ideas that operationalize a moral and pedagogical commitment to protect our students and our society's democratic aspirations in the face of normalized oppression.

Next, Keith Benson investigates whether low-income urban communities—ones that are often dictated to by schools, teachers and education researchers pertaining to how they ought to help schools educate children—have their own expectations for urban educators. With Camden, New Jersey being the geographic setting for his article, Benson essentially asks Camden's residents, specifically, and urban residents, generally, what expectations, if any, they have of their educators beyond the school setting.

Finally, closing out this section, Randy Miller explores whether “good” teaching alone is

² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (M.B. Ramos, Trans., New York: Bloomsbury Press, 1970/2000).

sufficient for improving low-income minority students' academic outcomes. Acknowledging academic research pointing to effective teaching as the strongest predictor of improved student performance, Miller arrives at the conclusion that, despite the best efforts of educators, non-school bound issues disconnected from classroom instruction can frustrate the efforts of even the most effective teachers.

In the next section, dedicated to what educator activism looks like, we begin with a piece by Janene Onyango that explores urban teachers' power to heal emotionally wounded black and Latina girls through restorative practices centered around communication, sharing, and care. Using vignettes, Onyango expresses the need for teachers to engage minority girls' sense of hurt and pain, often originating from places outside the school setting, in overt expressions of love and sisterhood as an alternative approach to discipline-only policies. Within this context of attempting to heal students' wounds endured outside the schoolhouse, Onyango displays how teachers can do needed community work, within their classroom.

Similarly, Chicago teachers Mayra Almaraz and Dave Stieber explore their approaches to overtly combatting racism within their classrooms and neighborhoods. Almaraz and Stieber plainly convey some of the strategies they employ to push back against racist thinking and privilege, both in their classroom and out. For both Almaraz and Stieber, their fight to be actively "anti-racist" is a matter of staying true to the profession they love, to their passion for their students and their city.

Victor Powell and Sheron Fraser-Burgess illustrate how both teachers and administrators formed an educator-led, non-school-bound program in the Washington DC metro area to improve the prospects of young men and women of color, from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are transitioning out of high school and into college and employment. While the program's focus is to develop the academic,

social, and interpersonal skills of minority students, Powell and Burgess' piece exemplifies how committed educators can unify around one common goal and work to improve the prospects of residents in urban communities through means unaffiliated with the school.

Philly educator Stephen Flemming's submission helps us understand the various ways teachers can exhibit community-based resistance as a demonstration of unity and solidarity. From curriculum battles, to community events, from patronizing local barbershops, to living where he teaches, Flemming's article conveys the wide and varied approaches urban educators can act upon to support the urban communities in which they teach—thereby forming bonds grounded in social justice advocacy.

Rounding out this section on what educator activism looks like, Stephen Danley and Gayle Christiansen convey their experiences as educated, professional, white, millennials—with privilege—moving into Camden, New Jersey. Ever aware of prevailing gentrifier and "white-savior" stereotypes, this piece lays bare the struggles that coincided with being privileged white gentrifiers who hope to balance their desire to work alongside residents to achieve greater community empowerment, and at the same time juggle their own political, economic, and racial realities.

In our final section covering educational institutions' aid to communities, Wendy Osefo examines how an urban, community-based charter school confronted the oft-cited problem of parental disengagement. Here, Osefo conveys how a school's efforts to maximize students' success and engaged parents directly eventually led to a parent engagement institute that taught historically marginalized community members how to advocate on their own behalf. Osefo demonstrates how a school can maximize student academic outcomes by engaging parents directly, empowering hundreds of alienated and historically marginalized residents.

Next, urban policy analyst Tarika Dorner, posits that if educators truly desire to be community advocates for social justice, both urban educators and their urban institutions must modernize students' high school curriculum by shifting toward a more entrepreneurial pedagogy. In noting that academic achievement alone is insufficient to lift economically-struggling students (and their families) out of generational and racialized poverty, Dorner asserts that urban students must be equipped, in their schools, with both entrepreneurial knowledge and adequate social networks to benefit their respective communities.

Finally, in the issue's last piece, Mildred Boveda examines the work of schools of education in preparing the next generation of urban educators. Boveda suggests that institutions of higher education, which are increasingly under attack from politicians and lawmakers, ought be more self-critical and reflective in addressing their own shortcomings. In this way, they might better prepare their teacher candidates for a future in urban education—one grounded in civic activism amidst the ever-evolving urban education terrain.

Thank you for your interest in the *Journal of School & Society*. I hope this issue inspires you with stories of heart, courage, activism, community and justice.