

Fight! Fight! Fight!

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The school bell tolls, signaling the commencement of another school day. Students file into the building, making beelines to their respective classrooms, to begin another day of *something*.

That something, ideally, would be quality, memorable, engaging, exciting, conversation-at-home-worthy teaching and learning experiences, entrenched in what Ladson-Billings calls, *culturally relevant pedagogy*.¹

In many instances, all of the aforementioned types of experiences plop themselves down in seats on the last row—you know, somewhere in the back, “over there,” out of the way. Often seated in the front of the classroom, and much more visible, are test-prep drills and bubble sheets, dingy buildings, obsolete technology, tattered books, curricula that reflects the language, heritage, and culture of the majority of teachers, but not the majority of students. Some life.

Also seated in the front row, if not closer, are systems bent on maintaining the marginalization of students of color, who are often living below the poverty line and outside of red-lined neighborhoods.

Interesting life.

Teachers in urban settings, who care enough to notice these issues, are in unique po-

sitions to play pivotal roles in advocating for change. Teachers who care enough to notice and not make these experiences fodder for dinner time banter, teacher who can and should be advocates for social justice—as they are often up close and personal with the struggles and successes of many students, often students of color.

It's no small feat, and no simple task, to lay hold onto the issues and fight from the inside—from the classroom.

I'd like to think I'm one such teacher, a teacher who is *'bout that life!*

There are many challenges that urban educators face, most of which are entangled in a motley mix of political mandates. They have very little, if anything, to do with real teaching and learning. These improperly informed political mandates and structurally deficient systemic issues are the exact contexts in which educators engaged in the work of advocating for social justice find themselves. It's no small feat, and no simple task, to lay hold onto the issues and fight from the inside—from the classroom.

But the fight, it is a necessary one.

Educators who are advocates for social justice have many weapons from which to choose. Those weapons range from sounding off on myriad social media platforms to pounding the pavement in marches and protests. They include drumming up conversations and plans in barbershops, living rooms, cafés, or even on the bus.

I should know. I've engaged in all of the aforementioned activities. When the clarion call was made to bring awareness to funding issues and staff shortages in our public schools—and yet the district continued to approve charter schools—I pounded the pavement in marches

¹ Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Fighting for our lives: Preparing teachers to teach african-american students. *Journal of Teacher Education* 51(3), 206-214.

and rallies at the school district administration building, outside of U.S. Senator Toomey's office, and in the Germantown section of the city where I work. I've composed and sent countless emails to the state representatives of where I live in Southwest Philadelphia and the school where I work in Germantown for the exact same reason. Not to mention the numerous tweets I've sent in order to shed some light on these same subjects—whereas others feel as though they cannot speak for fear of their rogue administrator's retaliatory memos.

These partnerships have also included my and my colleagues' working with community organizations to beautify the school grounds in order to make it a place and space that is warm and welcoming, not only for the students, but also for some of our insect and bird friends with whom we share Mother Earth.

Still, I remain undaunted. Why?

Allow me to invoke the words of my dearly departed Pastor: "for the generation that is now and the generation that is to come."

My students are worth the fight! With all of these options, however, the most effective options for advancing social justice involves working alongside families and residents in the vicinity of the neighborhood public school. The coalition that is the educator-resident-family alliance is a threefold chord not easily broken. Working in tandem, urban educators, urban families, and urban residents can be relentless in their efforts. Together, they can assist each other in fighting community-based struggles,

including those of the neighborhood public school.

As urban educators build these coalitions, it is imperative that teachers, especially those who are not from or don't live in the communities in which they teach, understand that families and residents are *allies* in the fight for social justice. It's a *relationship*. A relationship but not a savior-syndrome relationship. The mentality that white educators are to come into the neighborhood public school and save the poor Black and Brown children from themselves.

It's a relationship. And as such, a partnership, each bringing a unique relevance to the cause. Urban educators bring with them knowledge of the system; families bring with them cultural capital and knowledge; and community-based organizations bring with them an understanding of the needs of the community. Together, these educators and families, these community members and students, whose arms and causes are interlocked in a fight for real equity and justice for all, are an unstoppable force.

As an educator and activist, I have had the privilege of partnering with parents on more than a few occasions. There was an ongoing fight to raise awareness of the physical conditions of the local neighborhood school. Together, parents and I, along with my colleagues, would call, email, or speak with school and district administrators. They did. We all did!

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We have also rallied *with* residents, parents, and the community in general in an effort to inform others members of the public of what budget cuts would actually look like at the school! Yes, this is a fight and fight we must!!

As with any relationship, it takes effort on the part of each party to maintain its authenticity, relevance, and brilliance. Maintenance of educator-family-community social justice relations requires that all embrace what Otto Scharmer refers to as “empathetic listening,” or the type of listening where, as he states, “our perception shifts.”²

This type of ear action goes beyond just hearing. This type of listening requires the respective parties to place themselves in the other’s shoes: educators, families, and community members all listening from one another’s point of view, hence “empathetic.”

To do so, allow me to suggest that each subscribe to the other’s email lists, follow each other’s professional social media accounts, or meet for lunch or dinner every now and then. Perhaps community members and families could attend functions at school and educators could hang around after school and attend functions in the neighborhood.

Once there, enjoy the event, and when appropriate, talk. Talk about the needs and successes of the community. Be intentional in broaching the needs of the school with parents and families. Follow up with a call, email, text or tweet. Whatever you do, communicate and communicate often.

As an educator at the neighborhood public school and a native of the city in which I teach, I make it a point to attend local high school football and basketball games. I frequent the corner stores, local eateries, and some of the chain stores in the neighborhood. I chat with brothers while waiting to get my fresh fade at the local barbershop a few blocks away from the school (Now that’s a great place to stir folks to action, the barbershop!).

The parents of current and former students often email, text, or hit me up on social media

with questions, concerns, compliments, or just to say hi. These relationships? They are a must! They build mutual trust. Not only do I talk, but I also listen.

As parents talk in the neighborhood, and at the beginning and end of the school day, I get a sense of their likes and dislikes. Whether I am the subject of their conversations or not, their opinion of the school, of the educational program, of my colleagues—it matters. If we are to accomplish anything as allied force, we cannot dismiss the voices of any of our partners, be they constituents, kids, or colleagues.

Communicating and relationship-forming is a start. A little positive PR couldn’t hurt either. Boast a bit, and publicly! Nothing solidifies deficit-model thinking and pedagogy more than highly and oft-publicized neighborhoods in distress and the fight to *fix* them! For this reason, educators, families, and the community at large should infuse counter-narratives into public discourse.

Yes, we have some struggles and will continue to fight! But in the midst of the fight, we offer the following success stories...

Take, for example, my and my students’ experiences. Our classroom library was negligible at best. With the support of family, friends, a community member, and a grandparent, all of whom are loyal supporters of my classes, we now have a classroom library rich in diverse reading materials.

We, in turn, volunteer once a month at the local nursing home, reading with the residence there, using some of those same books that now comprise our library. I’ve written about it, posted to social media, and have allowed the kids to “snap” it as well. Technology can definitely be our friend.

It’s 2017 and technology has greatly changed the way in which we receive our news and other current events. It also has changed the landscape for how we fight! Using Twitter

² Scharmer, O.C. (2009). *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.

and other social media platforms, I urge you to inundate those timelines and inboxes! We see it with #BlackLivesMatter often. We saw it recently in the days following the inauguration of the 45th President with #WomenMarch. Additionally, in the aftermath of a series of Executive Orders, we saw it with #NoBan and #NoBanNoWall.

Educators, parents, and community members can harness the power of social media to amplify their voices on issues of social justice in their communities and in their neighborhood public schools. I certainly do and am not shy about it!! I've heard it said, for years, that a closed mouth doesn't get fed! Zora Neale Hurston said, "If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it."

In this quest for social justice, it doesn't hurt to go old school with fighting the power. Pick up the phone and dial the number of your lawmakers at the local, state, and federal levels! While they are all on social media, let the phones ring off the hook until there is assurance that they have heard the voices of the masses! Educators call representing the neighborhood public school's students, while at the same time parents are on the other line speaking up for their sons and daughters, while on line three, concerned community members tussling in the exact same fight to propel communities forward!

Just as the voices of adults are strong and effective, the voices of our youth are just as strong, just as important, just as necessary, and just as effective. Student organizations in Philadelphia, Newark, and elsewhere have demonstrated their collective power by organizing civil disobedience responses for social justice causes such as draconian school budget cuts and market-based school reform initiatives. Urban educators ought to encourage students in their civic engagement and democratic discourse, as they speak up for themselves, their teachers, and the generations of students who will one day follow suit.

The question is asked if we really are *'bout that life*. Absolutely!

Teachers who are *'bout that life* understand the bonds that need to be formed with parents, families and the communities we serve. Those of us who are truly *'bout that life* comprehend that communication with families, the community, our lawmakers, the social media world, with brothers at the barbershop or with sisters at the salon, all of that is key.

We must communicate the needs and successes of our schools and communities. Furthermore, educators who are really *'bout that life* fight the good fight, notwithstanding any nerves or feelings that might get in the way!

Ms. Cottman is one such teacher, digging deep into her own pockets and getting the help of family and friends to supplement such an endeavor

This fight is for survival and "thrival!"

Teachers *'bout that life* go old school with marches and phone calls, new school with emails and text messages, or newer school with social media—whichever school or tool, we all fight!

We encourage students in their speaking up for the education they want! We show them what is possible when they work hard and knock down the doors that may be in their way, as Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughn, Mary Jackson, and others did in real life, and in *Hidden Figures*.

Might I add, that teachers who are *'bout that life* sometimes do things like reach down deep in their own pockets, hundreds of dollars deep, to supplement the cost of a trip for an entire class of students (90+ students) to see that film because they believed in the value of such a lesson. Ms. Cottman is one such teacher, digging

deep into her own pockets and getting the help of family and friends to supplement such an endeavor, such a learning experience and memory; such a lesson.

A lesson the students might have missed were it not for the daily life's lessons they already receive from us who are *'bout that life*. What we saw solidified the life we already speak into their lives.

The school bell tolls, signaling the end of another school day. Because of the passion and heart of educators who are also advocates for social justice and linked with parents, families, and community members of the same mind, the students, who are departing for the afternoon, were involved in quality, memorable, engaging, exciting, conversation-at-home-worthy, culturally relevant teaching and learning experiences! They learned from teachers who really are *bout that life*.

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