

Toward Teacher Development for the Urban in Urban Teaching

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This article examines the potential of critical teacher inquiry groups to promote urban teacher retention, professional support and development. While much has been written in recent years about teacher inquiry, generally, little attention has been paid to professional development programs that highlight a critical analysis of urban schooling. Drawing on analysis of videos of group meetings, Email conversations with participants and informal interviews, this article concerns itself with a group of seven South Central Los Angeles elementary teachers that use critical inquiry to support each other in tackling multiple forms of inequality and oppression manifest in their classrooms, school and community. Brought together by a commitment to social justice, these teachers engage a set of shared readings in social and educational theory as the foundation for bi-monthly meetings. The article concludes with recommendations for on-going critical professional development models that support teachers as they confront the challenges of urban schools.

Introduction

The 2003 National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) report, 'No Dream Denied', argues that '[t]eacher retention has become a national crisis' (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). Nieto (2003) expresses similar concerns, raising two pressing questions to guide universities and urban school districts working to retain teachers:

... what should we know about effective, caring, committed, persevering teachers, and how can we use this knowledge to support all teachers and in the process support the students who most need them? (Nieto, 2003, p. 2)

A teacher's effectiveness is of little use to students if the teacher has left the profession, thus Nieto calls for teacher development that focuses on supporting teachers as an addition to the usual framework of training. Teacher support can potentially nurture a burgeoning new class of teachers to deliver on the promise of an equal education for

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all children. This article discusses the impact of just such a teacher development program working to support a group of early career teachers at Power Elementary School in South Central Los Angeles; a K-5 school comprising 680 students (59% Latino and 41% African-American), 93% of whom received a free/reduced price lunch, and 37 teachers (22% Asian/Philipino, 11% Latino, 35% African-American and 32% White).

Research has shown that urban teacher retention rates improve when teachers are prepared for the challenges of working in urban schools. This same research suggests, however, that without continued support this preparation may only delay teacher attrition (Hunter-Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003; Hunter-Quartz *et al.*, in press). The program discussed herein supports teachers as they develop the tools to act on the despair and loss of hope that often accompanies confronting their students' experiences and living conditions. The initial outcomes of the program suggest that when teachers collaborate in addressing more broadly their students' experiences and conditions, often by engaging the students themselves, they are able to bring hope and action to their daily struggles. The following sections examine how this type of teacher group can address Nieto's (2003) call for more effective urban teacher professional development and support.

Critical Teacher Inquiry at Power Elementary School

The 2003 NCTAF report reveals an urgent need for more effective teacher support systems. While much has been written in recent years about teacher inquiry as a site for urban teacher support (see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999; Oakes & Lipton, 2001), generally, little attention has been paid to the need for professional development programs that highlight a critical analysis of urban schooling. As the facilitator of a teacher development program at Power Elementary, I have worked to document the impact of the group's engagement in critical inquiry; a process by which these urban teachers work to powerfully address the needs of their students while they are engaged in their own professional growth.

An Email from Ms Grant, an inquiry participant at Power Elementary in her sixth year of teaching, shows that her students are facing critical situations that she cannot, individually, handle and that there is a lack of lateral support among teachers to help. She writes:

Today was an almost unbearably sad day at school ... interesting in light of our email exchange yesterday: according to my students (all of which were SOBBING) two young men (black) were sitting in a car yesterday afternoon ... some men in a car rolled up, got out and shot one in the eye (his head exploded) there was a 3 month old in the back seat (she was left 'unharmd') the other got out and ran (they call him 'baby' Marcus) the guys ran after him and shot him in the back and then more when he fell ... both men dead, the perpetrators got away ... the nephew of one is in my class, the brother of the other is in Mr. [Randall's] class. This is a close community so word spread pretty rapidly yesterday. For an hour and a half [this morning] the kids all just talked and cried. I felt ill-equipped to handle a crisis like this but, we got through it ... I said as little as possible,

I cried with the kids, we all consoled each other, and others began sharing different stories of violence and loss ... in the end, I did what I thought (and hope) was best ... tried to empower them with the belief that they must work to become the warriors who combat the senseless violence and madness on the streets. I also gave them some 'street lessons': walk against traffic, don't sit in parked cars chillin' with your friends, be vigilant, check your surroundings. We're making cards, and going to send a little money to the families ... and the kids all seem to feel a little better how would you handle this? It looks as if many teachers didn't say or do much ... feeling a bit weary today.

This Email is but one example of the intense challenges teachers face in urban schools. UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education and Access (IDEA) has tried to support teachers dealing with these challenges by creating critical teacher inquiry groups like the one that formed last year at Power Elementary School. Before providing examples of what goes on in their bi-weekly meetings, it is important to provide a brief explanation of what is meant here by "critical inquiry".

Critical Inquiry in Urban Schools

The term 'critical' has become the quintessential modifier for progressive practices in urban schools (critical pedagogy, critical inquiry, critical reflection). The widespread use of this term in the educational lexicon requires some attention to its use herein. To this end, a Freirean framework will be drawn on to briefly outline "critical" as it applies to dialogue, reflection and praxis in this study of teacher inquiry.

The modern use of the term "critical" in educational discourse is often linked to Freire's notion of critical pedagogy and its relationship to liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1970). In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire relies on a Marxist dialectic framework to define the process of being critical in three stages. For Freire, the first stage of being critical is the attainment of an awareness of the existence of oppressive conditions and recognition of the causes of those conditions (Stage A). This awareness generates a desire to pursue a "fuller humanity ... the authentic struggle to transform the situation" (p. 29) through action (Stage B). However, this transformative action is only critical when "it is not merely an occupation but also a preoccupation, that is, when it is not dichotomized from reflection" (p. 35) (Stage C). This process of awareness, transformative action and reflection is what Freire refers to as praxis: "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 33). This process is ultimately a dialectical one, each stage informing the other; the process returns one to the first stage to begin again the critical dialogue that leads to action.

For the group at Power Elementary, critical teacher inquiry begins with critical dialogue about issues facing their students, their school and the surrounding community. This critical dialogue has been sparked by discussions of readings that address issues of social and economic inequality in schools and the larger society (readings were selected by me in the first year). These discussions spawn curriculum planning that results in praxis on two levels; the teacher level and the student level. At the teacher level, implementation of this curriculum is a transformative action. At the student level, this curriculum also creates opportunities for praxis through:

(a) engagement in critical discussions that raise awareness; (b) transformative action as a result of their awareness; (c) reflection on that action. For the purposes of this article, however, the focus will remain on the teacher group's movement through the continuum of the cycle of praxis. This process happens as they reflect on the curriculum and pedagogy that results from their raised critical awareness. Reflection on their transformative pedagogy returns them to a critical dialogue for awareness, restarting the cycle of their praxis.

The Participants

The principal at Power Elementary was in his second year at the start of this program. In his first year he had worked hard to develop the reputation that the school welcomed partnerships with universities. Based on this reputation, I approached him about the development of a teacher inquiry group that would gather teachers at the school committed to developing as social justice educators (see Oakes & Lipton, 2001). In keeping with his reputation, the principal made an announcement at a staff meeting inviting all interested teachers to show up at an informational meeting. Seven teachers, several of whom were already working together on various projects and all of whom were familiar with each other's commitments to social justice education, volunteered to participate in the program for 3 years. In exchange for their participation, teachers receive annual university extension credits, copies of the selected readings and dinner at each meeting.

The Role of the Researcher

I am a researcher and part time faculty member in the School of Education at UCLA where I am the director of a 3 year research project examining the impact of critical teacher inquiry on teacher development, retention and efficacy. As part of this role, I help teachers locate readings that address topics that they designate. I also facilitate the group's discussion of these readings and their relevance to their school and classroom; these discussions are videotaped and transcribed for data collection. Additionally, I make myself available for individual meetings, phone conversations and electronic exchanges (Email and instant messaging) to extend the dialogue and to provide additional support.

Immediately prior to beginning this research project, I finished my 10th year in the Oakland (Northern California) public secondary schools, where I coached and taught English. Due to this fact, I did not have the opportunity to know any of the participants personally before our first meeting. However, my teaching experience allowed me to closely sympathize with the group's struggles, allowing us to bond more quickly.

The remaining sections of this article attempt to recapture the events of one group meeting in the hope of representing the potential of this approach to improve urban teacher support and development.

Power Elementary: The early meetings

The potential effectiveness of this type of teacher development model was revealed in December 2002, the group's fourth meeting. In the previous meetings the group had read and discussed articles on school accountability mechanisms and the usefulness of social theory as a lens for analyzing educational inequality. These readings included works by Darling-Hammond (1998), Freire (1970), Oakes and Lipton (2001) and Valenzuela (1999), to name a few. They used these articles to engage in a meta-critique of California's school accountability report cards (SARC) and the failure of this strategy to produce democratic reporting in their school. From these discussions they began strategizing group and school-wide goals for moving from critical awareness into transformative action; these included professional development seminars on social justice pedagogy, forming vertical teams (a strategy that breaks the school into teams consisting of one teacher from each grade level) and organizing a youth activist group on campus. What they had not done yet was to discuss their own pedagogy as transformative action.

The fourth group meeting began like previous ones, with open discussion of the readings (we were continuing readings on social theory and schooling inequality). The conversation was fruitful as the teachers commented on the usefulness of the articles, and social theory in general, for generating critiques of the unequal schooling conditions experienced by students at Power Elementary. However, what happened next shifted the group's focus onto their own pedagogy and exemplifies the transition from critical awareness to transformative pedagogy.

Ms Grant and a Culturally Conscious Critical Curriculum

Ms Grant, a 4th grade teacher who self-identified as Black, began her turn in the group discussion by drawing from her bag a *Los Angeles Times* article entitled 'City declares war on gangs' (Garvey & Winton, 2002), the abstract of which reads:

Mayor James K. Hahn and Los Angeles Police Chief William J. Bratton declared an all-out assault on the city's street gangs Tuesday, saying they will use the same tactics that crippled the Mafia to pursue gang leaders and members. Bratton on Tuesday called gang activity 'homeland terrorism,' warning that the city's street gangs are 'the head that needs to be cut off'.

Ms Grant summarized the article and the intent of the new Los Angeles police chief to use profiling techniques to crack down on suspected gang members before they engage in violent behavior. This response from the police chief came at a time when Los Angeles had leapt into national headlines as home to the nation's "killing fields". The murder rate had skyrocketed to over 600 in 2002, the overwhelming majority of which had occurred in the South Central section. At one point in late November, there were 15 straight days when at least one person was shot and killed within the same eight block radius. Much of this killing was attributed to gang warfare and much of this was happening in the neighborhoods surrounding Power Elementary School. The teachers in the group were acutely aware of the impact of these "ghettoized

conditions” (Tabb, 1970; Anyon, 1997) on their students and that the formal curriculum would not provide teachers with the tools to address these circumstances. They highlighted a district-mandated strict adherence to state curriculum standards, a culturally irrelevant scripted reading program and overemphasis on SAT-9 testing preparation as major contributors to the school’s long history of failing its 100% African-American and Latino student population.

In an effort to focus the group’s conversation onto the most pressing matters affecting classroom instruction, Ms Grant passed around a copy of the *Los Angeles Times* article and explained that she had shared it with her 4th grade class. Few, if any, of her students had been aware of the policies that were being put in place as measures to stop the killing. Ms Grant was particularly concerned about this fact, given that some local residents were likely to be negatively affected by profiling measures that would become legally justified causes for police harassment in the community. She was equally concerned by the fact that solutions to address the murder rate were designed largely, if not exclusively, by people who lived outside the community; a recipe for police insensitivity and increased tensions and hostility. Ultimately, Ms Grant saw a high probability that these policies would have a negative impact on her students and the school. Having grown up in East Palo Alto, dubbed the murder capital of the nation in the mid 1980s, she knew first hand the harmful impact of repressive police tactics as measures to curb violence. Drawing on her experiences, she explained that often the residual effect of such policies is feelings of increased disenfranchisement shared by disempowered groups of people that are confined in impoverished communities.

The group was intrigued by her analysis and pushed her to share how she used the article in her classroom. Grant explained that she had already read and critiqued the article with her students, probing their thoughts about the killings and the response of elected officials to the situation:

Ms Grant: We have to think of it like Freire for kids. We have to help our kids name their oppression first, before we can expect them to seek out liberation in any shape or form. So, to start talking about the killings in this way, to talk about how it’s going to affect them and their families in ways, like, just them going to the corner store, is important here.

For Ms Grant, the process of critical pedagogy is not limited to issues within her classroom. To implement the process of critical inquiry, she first engaged students in a lengthy discussion about the article and the impact such policies would have on their lives. Then they wrote expository papers on gangs, offering alternative methods for combating the proliferation of gangs and gang violence.

As Ms Grant finished an impassioned discussion of the unit and her politics of pedagogy, it was clear that the dynamics of the discussion had been dramatically altered. She had taken the discussions from meta-critiques of institutional inequality to microanalysis of classroom pedagogy. In so doing, she led the group from the first stage of praxis (critical awareness) into concrete discussions of stages two and three (transformative action and reflection on that action). Effectively, she had insisted that the group use their critical awareness of the larger social context in which they were

being asked to teach to discuss and develop transformative pedagogies. Her colleagues responded with great fervor. They found that many of them had been engaging their students in similar discussions about the killings, but none knew that the others were doing it. Pandora's box had been opened, unleashing the power of teachers collaborating as *compañeras/compañeros* (sisters and brothers in struggle), pursuing an authentically caring (Valenzuela, 1999) and empowering critical pedagogy (Shor, 1992).

Sparked by Ms Grant's unit and their own discussions, the group resolved that each of their classes would contribute to the creation of a quarterly thematic newspaper, showcasing their students' work. The first issue, they decided, would focus on critiquing popularized notions of gangs and gang members. Talk of this collaborative newsletter turned the discussion to lessons that would teach grade level standards and empower students to produce humanizing narratives about gang members as well as more positive counter-narratives about their community.

Ms Kim and the Caring Community Circle

Ms Kim, a 2nd year teacher who self-identified as Korean-American, volunteered that her class could contribute important research data to the newsletter. She explained that she was already dealing with similar issues with her 2nd graders because of recurring violent episodes in students' lives. She recounted a story from her class where the issue of gun violence in the community came to the fore of classroom dialogue. A Latino boy in the class was having trouble focusing and would frequently drift off as though something were troubling him. Finally, one of his peers suggested to Ms Kim that the class needed to get into a discussion circle, called a "community circle", to discuss a pressing issue. What emerged from the discussion was the fact that some 70% of her students had had their homes recently and frequently shot into, at or around. That number jumped to nearly 100% when students were asked if they knew someone who had been a victim of similar events. Through the peer-led group, the young boy who was struggling to focus shared that his house had been sprayed with bullets a few nights before and he was now having trouble coping because he feared for his life.

In response to their community circle dialogue, Ms Kim's class developed a student survey to poll other students at Power Elementary about issues of school and community safety. Students from the class distributed the survey to students around the school and used their mathematics class to tally the findings and discuss the relevance of the data to content standards areas. This evolved into larger discussions about the politics of public portrayals and stereotyping, culminating in Ms Kim's class writing letters to the mayor requesting that he rethink policies that promote profiling as a police practice. These letters received a response letter along with an autographed picture from the mayor shortly thereafter, both of which were displayed in the main office for the remainder of the school year.

Ms Kim revealed some of the potential fruits of critical teacher inquiry by sharing her pedagogy with the group. Her reflection on her classroom pedagogy added to the

discursive space opened by Ms Grant. In this case it created opportunities for the group members to: (1) give her critical feedback; (2) critically reflect on similar opportunities in their own practice; (3) consider opportunities for pedagogical collaborations within and beyond the group.

Inquiry Groups as Sites of Professional Development

Individually, each of the classroom strategies discussed here can stand on their own as powerful examples of teacher ingenuity leading to critical (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992), culturally conscious (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2003a,b) pedagogy. However, the power of this type of teacher group is the fact that these examples are not left to stand on their own because they are being shared among colleagues. In this process of sharing these social justice educators have carved out an element of the school culture where critical teacher practices are being normalized, rather than marginalized.

This type of professional development group provides an important opportunity for urban teachers to talk. This group's shared readings and commitment to grounded social justice pedagogy has created an intellectual and professional launching pad for important teacher discourse. A prime example of this can be seen in Ms Grant's sharing of her childhood experiences in East Palo Alto with the group. It gave the group another side to the value added paradigm of having teachers of color that can more closely identify with their students' experiences. While it is clear that teachers with these life experiences bring an important connection to students, Ms Grant's example helps us to see a less talked about addition that these teachers bring to urban schools. Her grounded perspective encourages us to consider the importance of creating spaces and relationships where teachers of color can also utilize their perspective for the development of their colleagues.

The fact that this group came together around issues of social justice and are using critical social and educational theory (Freire, 1970; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Oakes & Lipton, 2001) to inform their practice, created an opening for Ms Grant to share more than just a lesson plan. She was empowered to share her life experiences with the group, to critique some of the oppressive circumstances she experienced as a poor African-American child and to articulate the ways in which these experiences inform her practice. It is precisely the absence of these types of developmental opportunities that drives many critically oriented educators into the lone wolf mentality or, worse, out of the profession entirely.

This opportunity for critical inquiry at Power Elementary also produced progressive discussions about pedagogy and curriculum, something that is all too often lacking in schools serving poor children. The fact that Ms Grant's introduction to her curriculum unit was couched in critical social theory (Freire, 1970) had a profound impact on the type of discussion the group had about the lessons she was designing. It meant that she and her colleagues had to move off the page of State content standards and into the context of the community where those standards were being taught. This ensured that the conversation stayed away from the typical amorphous and sterile staff

meeting discussions of accountability and SAT-9 scores, focusing instead on the impact of critical social justice pedagogy on the daily lives of the students. Shifting the focus of teacher dialogues onto a more grounded theory of critical, culturally conscious pedagogy is supported and even augmented through the incorporation of a set of shared readings on critical social and educational theory. These readings serve to provide common ground on which teachers can bring to bear their respective knowledge and experiences, aiding in the development of a professional culture that rewards collegiality through challenging discussions about matters relevant to effective teaching in urban schools.

Confronting the Urban: Beating back or beaten back?

The commitment to new and more effective urban teacher development and retention efforts must focus on helping schools to answer Ms Grant's question, "How would you handle this?" Ultimately, effective urban teaching will have to step up to the challenge of tackling the most pressing issues of injustice and inequality facing urban communities. As this endeavor is undertaken, Ms Grant's question will emerge more often and a dynamic structure must be in place to provide critical support. Short of this, good pre-service training will simply delay the problem of attrition rather than create a cadre of lifelong professional teachers.

It is true that teachers trained specifically for practice in urban schools, like graduates from UCLA's Center X, are beating the national attrition odds (Hunter-Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003; Hunter-Quartz *et al.*, in press). However, UCLA's longitudinal studies of its Center X graduates indicate that, over time, these numbers become less hopeful, as do teacher attitudes. Why does teacher hopefulness dampen over time? Ms Grant's struggle with the violence in her school community is worth revisiting here in order to understand this trend. The longer tenures of the Center X graduates might be a result of explicit preparation for the challenges of schools like Power Elementary. We might further understand them as a result of the fact that Center X recruits only those teachers that intend to be lifelong educators in schools like Power Elementary. These two circumstances can be said to contribute to the development of an early career teaching professional that is better equipped than most to withstand the turbulence that new teachers in urban communities generally must face. However, the numbers suggest that the more dependent they become on their schools and districts for professional support, the more quickly their attrition rate accelerates.

There is a litany of possible explanations for this trend. However, while I would suggest that Center X must better consider its role in recruiting and preparing teachers for a lifelong commitment to education in urban communities, I believe that critical professional development structures can positively impact on these negative trends as well. Additionally, these models can develop and retain teachers that might not have had this type of training in their credentialing programs, further adding to a pool of urban teachers who are experiencing continuous, effective, relevant and critical professional growth.

Ms Grant, however, would remind us not to romanticize the process. Critical teacher inquiry groups will not change things overnight:

Ms Grant: To be honest, the group didn't help much in terms of the [shootings]. I don't recall having much discussion with group members about that incident except to talk about the admins inactivity and apathy. Part of the disconnect resulted from my visceral response that no one else seemed to grasp. Not blaming or upset with them, but I'm a Black woman raising a Black son without a father around. ... I've watched the magnetic pull of the streets and its violence my entire life. So this ... affects the way I perceive and respond to life. ... As a group we have to somehow shift the way we discuss and dialogue if we are to offer meaningful SUPPORT and COMMUNITY to each other. Of course I thrive intellectually, because my classroom practice and theories are expanding and being challenged. I love that the group dynamic engenders a desire to be a better classroom teacher. ... This community building will take time and interaction, both of which I sense are happening now. I feel confident that as I get to know them, and they me; more honesty, understanding and even confrontation will surface.

... the group has the potential to offer a teacher a community. People to just sit with you in the darkness, listening to you, nodding their heads, letting you cry, scream, vent, and then STILL telling you that you gotta do it ... that's damned powerful. A space where we can feel comfortable and safe to fall apart, (die), and be reborn, ready to keep moving. That's what it takes. No matter how many times it takes. Something like that doesn't come from staff developments, in-services about discipline and pedagogical practices, or even family and friends who tell you to just get the [hell] out!! ... Yeah, that's it ... coming back from the dead every day

Ms Grant's understanding that the group is not what it could be, but that it has already provided "something [...] that doesn't come from staff developments, in-services about discipline and pedagogical practices, or even family and friends", raises an important point. It highlights the need for professional development that uses teacher-centered dialogue to foster the internal capacities of a teaching staff to push each other.

More traditional professional development models, like the ones critiqued by Ms Grant, can breed over-reliance on outside consultants or district level "experts". Such practices can give rise to teacher resentment if they strip teachers of their professional expertise, placing it in the hands of so-called experts that are often out of touch with the day-to-day challenges of the classroom. These "banking models" (Freire, 1970) of professional development stymie critical teacher dialogue, diminishing the intellectual integrity of the profession. Finally, these traditional models wreak of hypocrisy; on the one hand, they ask teachers to value and make use of the "funds of knowledge" (Moll *et al.*, 1992) that their students bring with them to school while, on the other, subjecting teachers to deskilling professional development that strips them of their potential as agents of their own critical professional development.

Conclusions

Critical professional development models, like the one at Power Elementary, will be most successful with supportive partnerships. As with the example provided here, the impetus for this critical teacher culture might be initiated by an outside source (i.e.

university personnel). The developing culture, however, should be careful to avoid over-dependency on that source as the authority figure. An effective partnership will position teachers to see themselves as capable intellectuals, responsible for designing their own professional development. To that end, school administrators and outside professional developers must create and maintain a professional climate where teachers are treated as partners and not subjects. Facilitators, such as myself, must transition out of traditional leadership roles and become a support system for teachers; effectively empowering teachers to embrace responsibility for controlling their own development. This is not to say that teachers should have more work, only more control over the work that they do.

Excellent pre-service teacher education programs cannot, by themselves, alter the face of education in our urban communities. Simply stated, even the best trained early career teacher is still a novice. Meier (1995) reveals to us that great teaching is dependent on the creation of a school culture where courageous commitment to excellence is fostered and nurtured among the teachers and students alike. Like Ms Grant, I contend that great teachers are not born, they are developed inside critical teacher communities where excellence is cultivated and demanded and teachers “feel comfortable and safe to fall apart, (die), and be reborn, ready to keep moving”.

Teachers must be empowered to do the hard work that will allow them to lay claim to their own professional development and the design of more meaningful curriculum and assessment strategies. The teaching profession, particularly the faction that works in urban communities, must begin to demand more from itself and its constituents. This can begin to happen when teachers are encouraged to create, nurture and sustain professional environments where their intellectualism is focused on normalizing a critical, culturally conscious curriculum.

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