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Collaborative Research with Parents and Local Communities: Organizing Against Racism and Education Privatization

ABSTRACT: The author discusses her collaborative research with parents and communities against neoliberal education policies in Chicago. The paper summarizes several projects that challenge racism and educational privatization: using social science data to challenge public school closings, collaboration with a community organization to tell the story of the effects of school closings and disinvestment on African American students and schools from their own perspective, and research for a city-wide coalition for an elected school governance board. The author uses these projects to illustrate multiple forms of activist scholarship and some of their complexities and contradictions.

KEYWORDS: activist scholarship, community collaboration, education policy, neoliberalism, racism.

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When I joined the university in the mid-1990s after previous years as a labor and community activist and teacher, I was grappling with how to bring together social activism and scholarship. How could I use the resources of a public university, its privileged position, and my own training to further struggles for social justice?

I am working toward a synthesis through activist scholarship. For the past 12 years I have participated in social movements in education in Chicago and in an emergent national education movement for social justice. The national movement is mainly comprised of localized, diverse organizations of teachers, youth, education and cultural workers, and parents, contesting in various ways neoliberal education reforms (standardized testing, privatization of education, closing public schools, corporatization of schools). Teachers and parents are also developing more just, equitable, humanistic, and liberatory educational policies and practices. In Chicago, I am active in a 15-year-old organization, Teachers for Social Justice (TSJ). I also do collaborative research with students, teachers, and community members about the effects of neoliberal education policies and to expose underlying social forces behind them.

My collaborative research and my participation in education justice movements are the basis for publicly engaging the debate on neoliberal education policy. I write for popular media, and speak with community activists on radio shows, public panels, press conferences, community meetings, and so on. These activities are part of our effort to engage the public in dialogue and action to defend and transform public education in Chicago and nationally.

ACTIVIST SCHOLARSHIP

My collaborative research is grounded in a fundamental premise shared with Action Research—that theory and action inform each other (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). As Charles Hale puts it in the introduction to his edited book, *Engaging Contradictions* (Hale, 2008), a basic assumption of activist scholarship is that "knowledge is vital to social action" and "research and political engagement can be mutually enriching." I adopt Hale's definition of activist scholarship as collaborative and politically engaged; aligned with an organized, marginalized group in struggle; and highlighting their agency and standpoints.

The paradigm shift from positivist notions of objective, value-free social science, to an understanding that all knowledge is socially situated and has a point of view

has made engaged research a legitimate social science. However, though we may reject positivist notions of objectivity, we should not give up the idea of "rigor" in social science. In fact, as Hale points out, activist research has to be more rigorous, more thorough, because the stakes of "getting it right" are far higher—they have real consequences for people's struggles and lives. There are also particular complexities, contradictions, and tensions.

Like others doing this work, I grapple with the relationship between research and social action. That is, how can research help reconstruct the field of ideological and material struggle (Gilmore, 2008)? What is the relationship between the researcher and social movements? And how does social struggle create and transform knowledge (Lipsitz, 2008)?

My research makes a structural and cultural critique that challenges dominant groups and ideologies, aims to contribute to public conversation about policy, collaborates with African American and Latino parents and with teachers to bring in the voices and perspectives of those marginalized in dominant discourse, and seeks to produce knowledge vital to the struggle. To illustrate, below I summarize several projects organized against racism and education privatization done in collaboration with parents and local communities. I use these projects to suggest multiple forms of activist scholarship and some of their complexities and contradictions. But first, the context.

THE CONTEXT

Since the 1990s, education in the USA has been increasingly dominated by neoliberal policies: Top-down systems of accountability, standardized testing and the dominance of an audit culture in schools (Apple, 2007), and the expansion of education markets by closing public schools and privatization of schools and education services. The effects have been disastrous, particularly for students of color. Teaching and curriculum are narrowed to focus on preparing for standardized tests, especially in urban schools that serve mainly low-income students of color (minority students) (Lipman, 2004). Based on these tests, teachers and students are punished or rewarded and schools are forced to compete with each other. In urban school districts, authorities are closing dozens of public schools serving African American and Latino students and destabilizing students and communities, with little academic improvement (Lipman, 2011). School districts replace public schools with privately-run, publicly-funded charter schools staffed by non-union teachers who are often poorly trained novices or trained by on-line courses and "modules" marketed by private edu-corporations.

Chicago was a birthplace for top-down accountability and high stakes testing, and in 2004, Chicago school authorities, on the direction of the city's mayor who has total control of the school system, began closing public schools, mainly in African American and Latino neighborhoods and opening privately-run charter schools. Many of the closed schools were anchors in economically impoverished areas where

they provided stability and represented the cultural identities and intellectual contributions of racially and ethnically marginalized communities. In some cases closed schools were replaced with refurbished, rebranded new public schools designed to attract middle class residents as part of "place marketing" the areas for real estate development and pushing out the working class people who live there (Lipman, 2011). Thus, the people affected see these policies as racist and an attack on their whole community.

As Chicago's policies were adopted as a national model (particularly with the ascendance of Chicago's CEO of schools, Arne Duncan, to U.S. Secretary of Education, under President Obama), Chicago became a model for national education policy. Thus, our story and our resistance have taken on a national importance. I have participated actively as part of TSJ and through community-collaborative research.

CHALLENGING DOMINANT DISCOURSE AND NEOLIBERAL POLICY WITH SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA

In 2007, I joined with colleagues in the College of Urban Policy and Planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago to launch the Data and Democracy Project. The purpose of the project is to examine the intersection of education, housing, and economic development in Chicago and to provide data and analyses that can be used by communities contesting for sustainable and equitable community development, housing and schools. The project is grounded in the assumption that people organizing in their communities and schools need data to analyze their situation and to help them frame issues.

As Chicago began closing public schools on grounds that they were "failing" or "underutilized," parents, residents of low-income African American communities, high school and elementary school students, and teachers had many personal stories about the injustice of the policies, but they also wanted to challenge the mayor and his appointed Board of Education on their own arguments. They wanted to combat the official data on student performance and efficient use of school buildings, which they considered erroneous, with their own data. They were particularly interested in exposing connections between school closings and poverty, race, gentrification, and community destabilization, and to talk about what was actually happening in their schools. In 2008, 2009, and 2012 the Data and Democracy project produced reports that refuted Chicago Public Schools (CPS) claims about school failure and under-enrollment. We produced GIS maps showing the overlay of school closings and gentrification, home foreclosures, poverty, and race and ethnicity (Greenlee, Hudspeth, Lipman, Smith & Smith, 2008; Fleming, Greenlee, Gutstein, Lipman & Smith, 2009; Lipman, Smith & Gutstein, 2012).

We also worked with teachers and parents to diagram and calculate how their school buildings were actually utilized and created a new measure of school utilization that we termed "educationally appropriate use of space." For example, in 2008, CPS proposed to close Andersen Elementary School, a successful neighborhood

school in a gentrifying neighborhood. CPS claimed the school, which served primarily low-income Latino and African American students was underutilized and should be closed (they planned to refurbish and reopen the school as a selective enrollment school, branded for new upper-middle-class families moving into the neighborhood, excluding most of the low-income students). Our measure of educationally appropriate enrollment, constructed with teachers and the school principal, showed that the school was actually fully utilized because it had a large population of students with special needs (disabilities) requiring very small classes, some as small as 8 students. The school-community used the report to contest plans to close Andersen.

Data and Democracy reports also include short ethnographic case studies that bring schools to life from the perspectives of parents and teachers. We develop the case studies collaboratively with parents and teachers. For example, Andersen teachers highlighted the many enrichment programs they had developed in partnership with community organizations. "We have worked so hard to bring all these programs into the school, and now they want to phase us out. The children deserve better," one teacher said. We released the reports at press conferences and distributed them to affected schools. Several school communities used them to challenge rationales for closing their schools.

Our goal was to use research to reframe issues and contest the legitimacy of official data used to justify closing schools. We combined the data and expertise of university researchers with the data and knowledge of teachers and parents. They knew how their school buildings were actually being used or what they were doing to improve learning, and the community knew what the schools meant to them. Their data and insights combined with our data on gentrification, spatialization of poverty, racial segregation, and school district-wide utilization of space were the bases for contesting school closures and privatization by reframing neoliberal discourses of efficiency e.g. "underutilized schools" reframed as "educationally appropriate" use of school space and "failing" schools as "community anchors". Our reframing and data were based on university/community collaboration, but our university credentials and expertise lent credibility.

This project has contradictions and limitations. It engages on terms legitimized by the dominant discourse: valid knowledge is produced by university researchers who use data, especially quantitative data, to arrive at objective conclusions. This valorizes expert knowledge -- a hallmark of neoliberal policy discourse used to position parents and community members as illegitimate knowers or simply against change.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

I have been collaborating with an African American community organization that has been at the forefront of opposition to school closures since 2004. In 2006, the education organizer asked me to work with him to study the effects of school closures on schools in his community. The report we co-produced was called *Students as Collateral Damage* (Lipman & Person, 2007).

Collateral Damage told the story of the effects of school closures from the perspective of teachers, school administrators and other school staff, parents, and students. As we wrote at the beginning of the study: "A guiding assumption of this study is that people are experts on their own experience." They recounted how school closures resulted in the destabilization of affected schools and educational programs, increased violence and lack of safety in schools, loss of a sense of school community, negative educational impacts, and emotional stress on students, parents, and teachers. For example, parents talked about the lack of involvement of the community in decisions to close schools. Parent:

> We were not informed a month ahead of time. It was like a couple of weeks. And we were not informed by word of mouth. We had a flier. Basically, it was like this. Read this. Take it home and read it. And I mean, it's like, it's closing and there's nothing we can do about it. No voting, no taking a stand or nothing. This is law....And that was like a couple weeks before school was actually out, so they didn't give us time to prepare ourselves, prepare our children, you know, where [are] they going to go?

A second example is a policy brief in the form of a case study, *Dyett High School: The 3D's of Chicago School Reform—Destabilization, Disinvestment, and Disenfranchisement* (Gutierrez & Lipman, 2012)**.** The case study demonstrates that Dyett High School, a school serving low-income African American students, that authorities closed in 2012, was set up to fail by the school district's policies of disinvestment, destabilization, and disenfranchisement. These racist policies at Dyett exemplify what has happened with over 100 public schools in Chicago in African American communities.

In close collaboration with students, teachers, administrators, and community members, my colleague, Rhoda Rae Gutierrez, and I catalogued the history of these policies and constructed the 3D's framework. We demonstrated that CPS had starved Dyett High School of resources and forced cuts in crucial programs and curricula that help students graduate and are necessary to gain admission into college. We showed that the school district also destabilized the school with a constant turnover of leadership and teachers while parents and students were locked out of the process of deciding what should happen to their school. Parents, students, and the community organization continue to use the Dyett policy brief locally and nationally as part of a national campaign to make school closures in African American communities a civil rights issue.

These projects were collaborative with the community organization members—in terms of conception, research design, interview questions, final analysis and editing. Both *Collateral Damage* and the Dyett policy brief were their ideas, and students, community members, and teachers provided most of the data. In *Collateral Damage* the community organizer and I did all the interviews together. In the Dyett case study, Gutierrez and I gathered the data in close consultation with the community organizer.

In both cases, the research process helped those involved to clarify issues and develop a common narrative that framed their campaign.

In this kind of project, university or academic researchers and community activists collaborate to produce proactive knowledge that aids the struggle, and the research is part of the struggle itself. However in our case, collaboration did mean division of labor and diverse expertise. In the midst of rapidly developing events and actions, community organizations generally don't have time or expertise for all the research and writing steps necessary to produce a final report. They benefit from the work of researchers whose job it is to organize the project and do some of the work provisionally, in ways they can then engage with. We university-based researchers had the responsibility for the initial analysis, writing and for production. The community organization participated, reviewed, revised, and had the final say.

One complication of this sort of action-driven research is a tension between rigor and the community's need to "get it out" quickly. Something is sacrificed either way. There are other limitations. Especially with *Collateral Damage*, the media and policy makers saw voices of parents and school staff as not "real data" compared with statistics and the research as questionable because it was not "objective." Thus researchers have the responsibility to not only produce accurate data but, particularly in the neoliberal accountability metrics climate, to contest what counts as legitimate knowledge.

RESEARCH FOR A CITY-WIDE ORGANIZING CAMPAIGN:

Chicago's public school governing board is appointed by the mayor. The Board makes decisions with no public accountability. This is unlike over 90% of local school governing boards in the USA which are locally elected and accountable to the parents and community members who elect them. Chicago pioneered mayoral control of big city school districts through mayoral appointed governing bodies and school district heads, thus placing a powerful tool in the hands of the mayor to impose neoliberal education policies. Frustrated with the inability to influence education policies in Chicago, a coalition of community organizations launched a campaign for an elected school board that would be representative of, and accountable to the public. The coalition, which Eric Gutstein (an activist scholar) and I participated in as members of TSJ, asked us to do a study of the issue.

The findings were not entirely what we expected. We found no evidence that urban school districts with elected boards had better education outcomes. But we did learn that elected boards provided more space for public voice and ability to influence policy. The report we wrote (Lipman & Gutstein, 2011) also demonstrated that appointed boards do little to improve education, and in Chicago, under the appointed Board, racial inequality in education outcomes increased and education overall was not improved. The report is being used as the research base for a city-wide grassroots campaign for an elected school board in Chicago.

The limitation of this sort of research is that although it serves as a platform for action, it does not allow for a nuanced discussion of a multi-faceted issue such as gov-

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ernance. The complexity of educational change, the interconnection of governance and policy, and the power relations inherent in electoral democracy in the context of immense corporate power, as well as many other issues cannot be addressed by research that isolates one aspect, i.e. governance. Yet grassroots activists wage campaigns around specific issues and need focused research.

CRITICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND ACTIVISM

Sometimes scholarship and activism do not overlap. My academic writing is indebted to the intellectual and practical leadership of the grassroots organizers, teachers, and parents I am allied with. But my audience for academic publications is mainly academics, university students, and some educators. Grassroots activists may not find it that useful. At other times, I put aside my researcher hat because I can be more useful as an activist. Although I believe scholars play an important role, for me it is not always synonymous with acting to make social change. I draw a distinction between what Mehan refers to as "on and off the record" practices. I never use coalition strategy sessions or meetings with community members to collect data. I am not doing research then, although my thinking is undeniably influenced by these experiences.

Each of these roles involves contradictions and complexities. As a white woman professional, ccollaboration with teachers and communities of color also requires negotiating boundaries of race, class, gender, and privilege––and a lot of humility. I am reminded of Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2002) admonition to the intellectual to keep "a constant epistemological and political vigilance on [her] self lest [her] help becomes useless or even counterproductive" (p. 1085).

CONCLUSION

The benefits of democratic, action-oriented research cut two ways, enriching possibilities for understanding the world in order to change it. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2008) put it, if critical academics work in solidarity with social movements "we have the precious opportunity to think in cross cutting ways and to find both promising continuities and productive breaks in the mix of people, histories, political and economic forces that make up forgotten landscapes" (p. 31). Social movements produce new knowledge, new ways of framing social problems, new social imaginaries. In *Freedom Dreams,* Robin D. G. Kelley (2003), writes, "Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression. The best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to imagine a new society" (p. 9). George Lipsitz's (2008) historical account of the knowledge produced by social movements in the USA-- from the Black reconstructionist governments in the post-Civil War U.S. South, to the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s––richly illustrates this point. On the other hand, research can help reconstruct the field of ideological and material struggle (Gilmore, 2008). Scholars with specialized expertise working in non-hierarchical collaboration with community and union activists and

social movements can contribute to new understandings and help construct a new social imaginary.

Above all, our work as activist scholars is not altruistic. Although university-based scholars generally have more privileges than the grassroots organizations and movements we collaborate with, it is our struggle too. The future is in the balance. The current global capitalist crisis, catastrophic climate change, intensified poverty and economic polarization, wars, racism, dominance of neoliberal policies that aim to turn everything over to the market—all this affects all of us. It undermines the university, our communities, the welfare of our families, our social relations, and threatens our very survival. We have to address these problems together for our collective future.

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BADANIA UCZESTNICZĄCE Z RODZICAMI I LOKALNYMI SPOŁECZNOŚCIAMI: PRZECIW RASIZMOWI I PRYWATYZOWANIU EDUKACJI

ABSTRAKT: Autorka omawia swe uczestniczące badania przeprowadzone wspólnie z rodzicami i działaczami z lokalnych społeczności podjęte w sprzeciwie wobec neoliberalnej polityki oświatowej wdrażanej w Chicago. Artykuł przedstawia pokrótce kilka projektów, których celem było przeciwstawienie się rasizmowi i prywatyzowaniu edukacji. Wśród nich poczesne miejsce zajmuje wykorzystywanie danych dostarczonych przez nauki społeczne do podważania zasadności zamykania szkół, współpraca z lokalną społecznością, aby uwypuklić jej własny ogląd skutków zamykania szkół oraz niedoinwestowania afro-amerykańskich uczniów i szkół, oraz badania dążące do zawiązania ogólnomiejskiej koalicji na rzecz ustanowienia wybieralnego zarządu szkolnictwa. Autorka odwołuje się do tych projektów, aby zilustrować różnorodność aktywistycznej nauki, także jej złożoności i wewnętrzne sprzeczności.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: aktywistyczna nauka, neoliberalizm, polityka oświatowa, współpraca z lokalną społecznością.

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