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A Note on the Politics of Place and Public Pedagogy

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A comrade often reminds me to understand urban public education as “contested space.” When I first heard this concept, I felt that I had an idea of what he was talking about, but I wasn’t quite sure. After further conversation and reflection, I began to understand what he really meant. For him, the contested space of urban public education is the sum total of all parties vying for power and perceived control of schools or policies that impact said institutions. Expanding his description of education in a broader sense, the spaces that stand outside of the traditional school setting (community centers, board meetings, school design team collaboration, community organization, etc.) should also be included in this discussion.

All of the aforementioned spaces should be considered political—not political in terms of partisan politics but “political” meaning relating to power, influence, and function. Integrated throughout the spaces of students, parents, teachers, and administrators, this political landscape can determine the “status” of a school and its place on the ladder of political will. Additionally complicated by issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability, this specific pecking order can determine the way schools receive monies needed for daily operations or additional resources for additional programming to address site-specific needs (e.g., specialized curriculum, support for non-traditional scheduling, community liaisons, etc.). In addition to understanding the people who make the school a reality, naming the various systems of power at play is critical for developing holistic praxis in addressing issues of justice in public education.

Noting the various levels of power in the political landscape of urban public schools, this chapter speaks to the struggles of a community-engaged researcher at one site amidst political struggles for power and control. In these spaces it becomes critically important for engaged researchers who work in schools and communities to utilize perspectives centered in a practice that has the issues and concerns of students, parents, and community members at its center. Such commitment to praxis (action and reflection on the world in order to change it) challenges us to maintain balance between theoretical understandings and practical certainties. Sometimes referenced as “making the philosophical practical,” I share Tozer’s (2003) challenges in that

I am troubled…by my own uncertainty about the relationship between my educational activism and philosophy of education, and I am seeking a way to make that uncertainty constructive instead of paralyzing. (p. 9)
By recording and theorizing an instance where educational researchers have made the conscious decision to actively involve themselves in developing social justice initiatives in urban schools and community spaces, we are able to document the contradictions and synergy between theory and practice.

From a pedagogical perspective, community-engaged researchers find themselves in a Freirean moment. As liberatory practice, our work calls for us to balance the constraints placed on us by oppressive forces (in this case the bureaucracy of urban central school offices) and our educational philosophies of co-creating spaces for young people to critically analyze the world while working to change it. Such practice is “public” in the sense that it does not take place behind closed doors. Instead, it is “out in the open” to be challenged and critiqued. Where critical accounts exist in relation to the political economy of schooling (i.e., Apple, 1995; Freire, 2003; Lipman, 2004; Spring, 1980), site-specific examples provide researchers with additional tools with which to address such concerns. Continuing such work requires us to speak candidly about what we experience in educational research with communities amidst struggles for power.

For the purposes of this chapter, I refer to the work mentioned in the previous paragraph as the “politics of place,” which captures many of the problems of urban education (e.g., lack of resources, irrelevant curriculum, schools existing in isolation to communities, etc.). In relation to education broadly speaking, the politics of place includes the site-specific effects of policies created by political entities that have the potential to negatively impact the work we do with young people, teachers, community members, and administrators inside and outside of traditional school spaces. For my purposes here, place refers to the spaces we occupy as educators (broadly speaking) with regard to larger political structures that impact communities and school systems. Recognition of the “places” in which we operate allows us to assess and navigate our situations, enabling us to work closer with those concerned with social justice in education. Borrowing from the discipline of critical geography, investigating the politics of place includes substantive analysis of the diverse and rapidly changing set of ideas and practices linked by a shared commitment to emancipatory politics (Johnson, Gregory, Pratt, & Watts, 2000). Expanding this definition, Gieryn (2000) states that place “is not just a setting or backdrop, but an agentic player in the game—a force with detectable and independent effects on social life” (p. 466). In later sections, such effects are analyzed through the convergence of housing and educational policy with relation to a community-based education project. Place is discussed beyond physical location to reveal the deep, interwoven connections between displacement and business models disguised as education plans. I also draw in my analysis upon Critical Race Theory (CRT), which seeks to address these relationships through the blending of research and practice. Through these exercises I am attempting to make my pedagogy accessible and transparent in spaces external to the traditional school setting.

Narrative, Critical Race Theory, and the Politics of Place

As a theoretical construct, CRT reminds us of the centrality of narrative when investigating issues of power and privilege. As a method, CRT uses “storytelling” to analyze myths, presuppositions, and conventional wisdoms about race to construct a different reality—one that reveals oppression and how it works. Positioned as “counterstories,” the purpose of such narratives is to “document the persistence of racism from those injured by its legacy” (Yosso, 2006, p. 10). Through these narratives we are able to locate the detectable effects of racism on social life, as people begin to locate themselves in larger historical understandings of the myths and assumptions that fuel popular discourses on race. As an interdisciplinary concept, CRT draws from a broad base of literature in the humanities, social sciences, legal theory, and education, which
enables us to discuss the subtleties and overarching premises in the investigation of race. For the purpose of this chapter, I incorporate Solorzano’s (1997) education-centered explanation of CRT and its aims as an analytical tool.

CRT consists of the basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogies that seek to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom. CRT in education includes the following five elements that form the basic model: (a) the centrality of race and racism, and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination in education, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology around school failure, (c) the commitment to social justice in education, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the transdisciplinary perspective (Solorzano, 1997, p. 3). Separating overt bigotry from the subtleties of institutional racism, CRT reminds us that the complexities of racism, no matter the form, are endemic to daily life in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Coupled with the realities of class, the politics of race were highly visible in my brief tenure as a board member for the City as Classroom School (CAC), a project I will describe below. Through the following narratives and reflection, I will try to unpack the various layers of school creation within a politically contested moment in Chicago school reform. The story I tell speaks to a politics of place—it is a winding tale of political maneuvering, community inclusion, and educational justice. By providing specific details of my participation as a board member, my hope is to help readers understand the subtleties of the interplay between political, social, economic, and racial realities in a specific Chicago context. The subtle forms of the aforementioned realities are visible through the language and outcomes of the systems that governed our process on the board.

Locating “Social Justice”

The term “social justice” also deserves some attention. For the purposes of this account, social justice in urban education refers to the ability to create places where young people, families, community members, teachers, and administrators can critically analyze their experiences, conditions, and contexts while participating in a process to change oppressive conditions that may limit their ability to work in solidarity with each other. I propose this working definition to fend off critics who would malign “social justice” work as empty radical leftist rhetoric. If we are intentional in the language describing our work, it becomes easier to share our ideas and concepts with individuals and groups who are working to change the processes and conditions that shape urban schools. Discussed in detail throughout the account, intentionality becomes a key concept in my attempt at developing praxis.

The Site: City and Social Justice

Several scholars have described their work in communities as “activist scholarship,” “engaged research,” or “participatory action research” (PAR) (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2006). Although I align my work with many of these scholars, the concept “community-engaged researcher” best speaks to my attempt to integrate the day-to-day community work I do, with research to address the issues and concerns expressed by those communities in relationship to education. I try to streamline my work as professor at an urban public university with community initiatives aimed at securing useful, relevant, community-controlled schools.

This disposition has led me to do my work in a number of ways. Before I became involved
with the City as Classroom School, I taught a high school social studies class in a city-wide program in Chicago called City as Classroom. This program sought to bring together a group of high school seniors from different high schools throughout the city to take courses in traditional and non-traditional educational settings, all of which collectively addressed issues pertaining to inequality, community, and social justice. Because I teach a college course on educational foundations from a critical perspective, I was contacted to create a unit for the program. For 10 weeks, 28 high school seniors from three Chicago high schools took my course on race and the media (Stovall, 2004). Teaching in a cohort of six other instructors, students attended classes on community organizing, language arts, law, and graphic design in addition to my class. Instead of traditional classroom settings, classes took place in spaces ranging from community centers to beauty salons. These spaces were believed to be just as valuable as traditional educational spaces in that they provided relevance to the students. The program’s creator felt that taking classes in “real world” settings would allow students to grasp the broader concept of education as the process of making informed decisions. Additionally, if students were interested in the classes and the people who taught or worked in the places where they were held, there was also the potential to identify a career path. In the same vein, the interests of the students would be the site to develop academic rigor in the form of community presentations, academic reports, and a semester-end culminating project detailing each student’s experience in the program.

After 3 years of operating the program, the director decided to use the format of the program to develop a high school with the same premise. The original concept for the high school was that it would operate from a central location, while the rest of the city would serve as the classroom, allowing students to process their experiences while engaging a curriculum centered in unpacking concepts of community and self-empowerment. Similar to the model used by Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center in Providence, Rhode Island, traditional classroom space would be reduced, with the majority of learning experiences taking place in spaces identified by young people as their places of interest (Levine, 2002). Supporting the work of the director, I was asked to serve on the advisory board of the City as Classroom High School (CAC), while agreeing to continue to teach an on-site social studies course during the spring semester.

In reference to the politics of place, the director of the initiative was able to connect her efforts to a larger political struggle of a community to address issues of equitable education. Community members expressed a desire to explore educational options to provide opportunities for young people in their neighborhood. Because many of the schools in the neighborhood were suffering from severe overcrowding and lack of resources, CAC sought to address these issues through a curriculum centered in self-empowerment and cultural relevance. The life of the school, albeit short (the school only lasted 3 months), is important to those who are intentional in making their pedagogy public. Operating in this contested space, the following account provides insight into the struggle to push for innovations despite the ripe contradictions of urban public education.

**Board Formation: Naming the Intersections of Power and Privilege**

Because the school was new, CAC board members were asked to perform numerous tasks. From cleaning the halls to developing fundraisers, each board member was expected to participate on committees constructed to advise the director on issues of curriculum development, community engagement, and budget. Because of the concept of the school and the numerous responsibilities involved, board members represented a broad spectrum of interests, and a broad spectrum of employment and social backgrounds. I sat on the board with parents, community organiz-
ers, neighborhood residents, lawyers, bankers, former school principals, high school teachers, university administrators, real estate developers, and other university faculty. The diversity of the board was originally conceptualized as a strength from which the development of the school could benefit, as each member could contribute various resources, knowledges, and talents. Instead, the background and experiences of board members created a chasm of sorts. My point is not to stereotype or malign those who share the “privileged” occupations of many of the board members. Rather, the particular instance discussed in this account requires a deconstruction of the dynamics of the board’s decision-making process. Remaining accountable to issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability, the nature of my position as university professor complicates matters, placing me in the “privileged” group to some degree.

Such contradictions are important to note as I have openly sided with members of the “unprivileged” group on the board, arguing against the influences of those who side with the mainstream establishment. The politics of place remain complex in that I am making the biased claim that I do not share the same vision of social justice as some board members. Doubly problematic to the situation, my occupation in name (university professor) would place me in the mainstream establishment, despite my personal involvement with educational justice efforts.

As an African American male occupying the position of university professor, the contradictions on the surface required me to constantly revisit my position on the board. Where the university title holds privilege on paper, my lived reality as an African American male in an urban setting reveals glaring contradictions. Coupled with a disproportionate racial and class dynamic (most of the board members who held affluent occupations were White, while the majority of people of color were employed in middle- to working-class occupations), the complexities are important to note in unpacking the board’s commitment to the school’s vision.

Upon first sight, the formation of the board would appear problematic. A common question asked of the school’s director was “if the school has a social justice agenda centered in the issues and concerns of low-income students, parents, and community members of color, why all the representation from the establishment on its board?” Although accepted as valid critique from people external to the board, the response (from some board members and the school’s director) was that the board members were selected based on previous relationships, access to resources (leverage), and support of the CAC program before it became a school. Because we were all hand-selected as board members and were brought into the fold with a deadline looming, there was little effort placed in mapping out the possibilities of conflicting views of board members.

Nevertheless, our rushed formation cannot be used as an excuse. Instead, my reflection notes this reality as key to making my practice transparent and “public.” With regard to this public school that was granted flexibility in terms of structure and curriculum, many of the board members sided with policies that justified a substandard, status-quo education for students who would be attending the school. While the idea for the school was noble and progressive, many board members felt that an education for “these” students (read African American, Latino/a and poor) should focus on rudimentary issues to get students “up to speed.” Coupled with insights from Critical Race Theory, the following example is a description of an instance that reveals the tug-of-war between social justice and mainstream views on education.

First Meeting: Convening the Board

The first board meeting was held at the home of two prominent business people in the city. Upon entering the home, I was quite surprised to notice the house had live-in housekeepers and an au pair. Noting its palatial size (five floors, three car garage, carriage house/servant quarters, half-acre front lawn), we were directed upstairs to the main dining hall to a table that sat
approximately 35 people. Upon viewing the room, I hesitated to sit down due to the fact that I was extremely uncomfortable in this setting. Viewing African American and Latino/a “house servants” in 2004 was a disturbing experience and signaled an age where rights for these groups were even more limited than they are today. Despite my personal struggles with the environment, I saw a few familiar faces trickle into the meeting. As we engaged in small talk, we all stated how flabbergasted we were with the space and began to ask each other questions around how big the place really was.

The director of the proposed school was present, and she directed everyone to be seated so the program could begin. Again, I was startled with the idea of a “program” before an initial board meeting. Many times I feel as if these programs have an unnecessary performative element to them, assuring the “gracious benefactors” that the people of color they are about to support will not do them bodily harm. Despite my comparison to the glee clubs from Historically Black Colleges and Universities that performed Negro Spirituals for the pleasure of White benefactors in the 19th century, I reminded myself that I was here for something bigger and should be respectful of the space. Since I knew and worked with about a third of the people seated at the table, I decided to calm down and take on my role as active listener.

After everyone was seated, the director introduced one of the homeowners, thanking her for the use of her space. Following the introduction, an African American woman stood up and welcomed the group. At this moment, I thought damn…this is a real CRT moment here: the politics of race and class are completely in overdrive. Here’s a rich Black woman with servants, nannies, and a dining hall in her house! Then, again to my surprise, her husband stood up and he was Black too! From this moment I felt as if I were locked into some type of terrible Oprah Winfrey nightmare that I would never be able to recover from. In my mind I thought, shit…these are the moments that the purveyors of White supremacy live for…the perfect opportunity to tell Black folks to shut the hell up…this rich Black couple proves the point that the rest of y’all are making excuses! The positionality of the homeowners was rife with contradictions. Even though I didn’t know them and had no right to judge, I still had to contend with the space they occupied among their White peers, also seated at the dining table. They represented the success story—the idea that all the “poor, underprivileged” students we would serve at the school should aspire to. Absent from the discussion would be the fact that despite their positions, many African Americans and Latino/as continue to occupy spaces of subservience in comparison to the wealthy. This was the exception that can be positioned as the norm. Because I didn’t want to kill the meeting before it begun, I made it my business to concentrate and make sense of the moment.

The program began with one of my comrades and his student. In addition to being a teacher, he’s a poet whose works have been distributed locally and nationally. His student was also a singer with an amazing voice. He began with a poem about Chicago and the numerous contradictions within our city. I thought this to be a nice jab to the establishment who are often in the game of selling the city’s positive attributes without grappling with the facts of what Chicago can mean to different groups. His student sang a song and recited a poem seconding the contradictions of love and hate for the city. Following the poem, the director had us introduce ourselves. During the introductions, I noticed that the majority of people did not affiliate themselves with K-12 institutions or community organizations. Instead, they were employees of established business or legal firms. In fact, while looking around the room, besides the owners of the home and the director, I was one of the few people of color seated at the table. As people began to introduce themselves as lawyers, bankers, and real estate developers, the most notable realization was that there were only two parents on the board and no students. Again, and similar to the boards of
many well-resourced schools that serve students of color, a board that has very little stake in the community controls the majority of decision-making. Similar to the development of many Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the White and privileged are situated in positions of power, creating a system of indirect rule (Watkins, 2001). While the faces visible to the world are those of color (in this case the students), the “movers and shakers,” despite their perceived good will, remain White.

Upon reflection, I understood (but didn’t agree with) the director’s position that these people could be important to the process. The positions they held could possibly allow the director to broker leverage with Chicago Public Schools (CPS). On the other hand, the operative word is *could*. Over the last 10 years, an approach by entities interested in establishing schools is to develop a board filled with people of “influence.” Most times these “influential” people are from the business or legal community, and often have proximal relationships with central school offices. As a tactic, recruiting people from the business and legal community can demonstrate to central educational offices that the director of the institution is in line with current policies to “ramp up” historically underperforming schools by demonstrating their value to free market economies. Referenced as the new “neoliberal” tradition in urban education, this process can become critically dangerous to communities interested in community input in education (Arrastia, 2007, p. 2).

Returning to the meeting, the goals and objectives of the school were explained to the group. To my surprise, there were very few questions or objections. Instead, the group decided on a meeting time for the next meeting. I went home a bit conflicted, but because I knew the director well and trusted her work, at minimum I committed to attend the next board meeting.

Meeting #2

On a late summer evening, board members were gathered to discuss the school’s structure and committee assignments. Because the board was large (it had 20-plus members), we were assembled in a space that served as an office and classroom. Compounding the situation, the community representative (soon to become chair of the executive committee) was a real estate developer in the neighborhood where the school is located. When a colleague noticed who the person was, he leaned over to me and asked “what’s he doing here?” Because the developer was viewed in a negative light by many community members (due to his participation in the redevelopment/gentrification of a section of the neighborhood), my colleague was startled at his attendance at the meeting. Throughout the course of the meeting, it was revealed to the rest of the board that he was responsible for securing the school’s newest location (the first school site was rejected by the school director due to scheduling conflicts). From informal conversations with other board members, it was also revealed that the developer was vilified in the community as a shrewd businessman with a penchant for making business decisions that were in opposition to the needs of community members. Many of his commercial developments were responsible for the rising property taxes in the neighborhood, which have prevented many residents from affording rent or making mortgage and property tax payments on their homes. Discussed at length later in the following section, the effects of gentrification on schooling are paramount in halting the ability of low-income families to remain in their communities and attend schools in gentrifying areas. Revisiting Gieryn’s (2000) notion of place, the physical backdrop and setting are as critical as the idea of who will be deemed valuable or disposable in the larger context of the city. As the meeting reached its end, I still wanted to support the work of the director, but it was becoming increasingly difficult as contradictions in the process became increasingly apparent.
A Tale of Converging Policies: The Plan for Transformation and Renaissance 2010

It is important to note that my interactions with the board took place during a pivotal historical moment in Chicago. The politics of place are critical to this discussion in order to understand the context of public schools in Chicago and the current intersection of housing and education reforms that continue to negatively impact many African American and Latino/a poor and working-class communities throughout the city. These policies were central to the school’s formation, as they heavily influenced the board’s decision-making process.

Documented extensively by Lipman (2003, 2004, 2006), the current wave of “reform” in Chicago is deeply rooted in a neoliberal agenda, centered in making Chicago a global city, attracting business, retail, and other commercial entities. Central to this neoliberal agenda is the positioning of the free-market economy as supreme, rationalizing the idea that people who are able to access opportunities afforded by the market are deserving of its benefits. In the realm of education, neoliberalism as policy is masked in the rhetoric of “choice,” “competition,” “educational opportunities.” As families supposedly “choose” their educational options, missing from the equation is the fact that many will not be able to select those opportunities because rising housing costs will prevent them from living within the city limits. “Choice” in this sense is a false one, because choice is only afforded to the few that are able to remain.

Of course, there is a deeper story here. Despite the positive spin portrayed in media outlets or official city documents, the mayor’s attempt to frame Chicago as a global city has resulted in aligning the needs of the business community with his own to create a development plan. Missing from this “development” rhetoric is the critical analysis revealing the realities of forced displacement. Positioned as early as 1971 (and argued as coming to fruition in the summers of 2000 and 2004), Chicago has been involved in a housing redevelopment and school reform project, respectively known as the “Plan for Transformation” and Renaissance 2010. They are intimately connected with each other in that access to quality schools directly affects a family’s choice of where to live.

As a result of converging policies, many educational initiatives operate in concert with redevelopment efforts to foster displacement among the city’s working-class African American and Latino/a populations (Lipman, 2004). Since 2000, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), under its Plan for Transformation, has demolished over 50% of its public housing units. First calling for the demolition of all high-rise buildings (those over eight stories) by 2010, the plan has also supported the demolition of row house and medium-sized buildings. While many of the razed public housing complexes have been replaced with “mixed-income” developments, thousands of former CHA residents are unable to access the new construction. In order to live in the new mixed-income developments, residents have to meet a set of requirements. Most notably are the stipulations that require former CHA residents to work at least 30 hours per week, and have no history of drug abuse (Lipman, 2006). Additionally, and possibly most damning, no applicant to the new developments can have a felony conviction. On the surface, this would appear promising. But to the contrary, as we often know in issues concerning race and class, a counterstory exists.

To supplement the Plan for Transformation, the mayor, with Chicago Public Schools (CPS), in conjunction with the Civic Committee of The Commercial Club of Chicago (a conglomerate of the main business interests in Metropolitan Chicago), produced Renaissance 2010, an overarching policy proposing to close 70 existing underperforming schools and re-open them as 100 new schools under the rubric of charter, contract, or performance school. Beginning with the Civic Committee’s 2003 report Left Behind, (Commercial Club of Chicago, 2003) school problems (e.g., high dropout rates, low test scores, low rates of literacy, etc.) are constructed to be directly related to a failing system. A section from the introduction reads as follows:
The problem lies in the system, which lacks competitive pressures pushing it to achieve desired results. It responds more to politics and pressures from the school unions than to community or parental demands for quality. Schools, principals, and teachers are largely insulated from accountability or responsibility for results... The constraints of the city-wide teachers’ union contract, including the tenure system and the difficulty of removing teachers for cause, make management of the system’s human resources difficult. State achievement tests are not given in every grade every year, so it is impossible to see exactly where gains are made—or where students consistently fail to advance. Success is not rewarded; and failure is not—or infrequently—penalized. (Commercial Club of Chicago, 2003, p. 3)

The rhetoric of the previous excerpt is loaded for several reasons. “Accountability” and “responsibility” serve as coded proxies, marking test scores as the de facto marker of academic achievement. Neoliberal rhetoric of “constraints,” “management,” and “gains” speak to a desired emphasis on the primacy of market economies and the centrality of individual self-interest in all spheres of economic and social life (Lipman, 2004, p. 48). In short, Renaissance 2010 is not an education plan as much as it is a business strategy. Utilizing free market, neoliberal rhetoric, schools become the conduit through which to attract affluent families to the city.

Returning to the creation of CAC, the potential realities presented by Renaissance 2010 and the Plan for Transformation were critical to the creation of the school. While some members of the board thought it was a benign policy, others understood its deeper connotations and what it could potentially mean for the school’s creation. CPS, in an attempt to aggressively roll out its policy through school closings and new school openings, offered CAC an opening as a Renaissance 2010 school. For those of us who viewed our efforts to be in solidarity with efforts around the city in revealing the “truths” of these policies, this invitation made the school’s creation even more contentious.

**Phone Conference and Final Decision**

Because opening day was looming, CPS required the director to decide whether or not the school would be part of Renaissance 2010. Because she was an astute observer of the dissent of some board members, she called a meeting of the board to decide which direction to go. Where I was not able to physically attend the meeting due to travel, they agreed to link me into a conference call so I could relay my opinions about the recent CPS invitation.

The ensuing conversation was not civil. Some of the board members thought the meeting to be unnecessary as opening day was getting closer. Continuing their sentiment, some felt that we needed to understand the “imperfectness” of CPS and should just “go along” with whatever proposal was placed forward. In explaining the policy’s under-explained rhetoric of choice, I shared the particulars of the reality of the policy and what it was doing to communities across the city. I felt this was of particular importance to the group because one of the proposed sites for the school was in a neighborhood that was experiencing significant gentrification. One of the board members who was key in spearheading the gentrification process took offense to my comments that connected gentrification to public education. In response, I reiterated that CAC should caution itself in agreeing to a policy that could further isolate students in other parts of the city. He continued that my comments were negative and unsupportive of the effort to create the school. In response, I reminded him that there were other options we should explore before hastily “jumping into bed with CPS,” increasing our chances of further demise.

At the end of the conversation, the group decided to go with Renaissance 2010 because it was...
viewed as the only option. While I was upset with the decision, I knew there were other concerns as opening-day loomed near.

Conclusion: Honesty, Truth, and the Consequences of Public Pedagogy

As we prepared for opening day, it was clear that CPS never wanted the school to prosper. The director and teachers had to scramble to find necessities (chairs, tables, desks, school supplies, etc.) until the night before opening day. Additionally, the budget allocation formula for a school of this size (the freshman class had 60 students) did not allow the director to hire the recommended number of instructors for the program (her proposal requested 5 but she received 3). Some board members spent day and night calling neighboring schools and private donors to provide desks, tables, and chairs for the students. The lone two computers in the building were the director’s own.

In the end, leverage and influence from members of the board allowed for the school’s approval, but it did not go far enough to secure the essentials needed to ensure a quality educational institution. In the end, due to lack of resources (inability to hire instructors, minimal budget for supplies, no front office staff, no custodial staff) coupled with low-morale and frustration on all levels, the school was forced to close its doors 3 months after opening day. The director realized the constraints of CPS would not allow her vision of young people being able to interrogate their realities through academic and non-academic settings, and she called a meeting of her staff. Beginning with three instructors, the staff had been reduced to two, as one of the teachers left due to his displeasure with CPS’s lack of support of the initiative. The staff decided that the school could not function in its current state, and made the collective decision to close the school’s doors before the Christmas break. The last month of school was spent brokering transfers for students to neighboring public schools.

In reflection, it was a sad, but illuminating experience for those of us involved in the process. As I attempted to make my pedagogy public by participating in an educational model geared at centering itself in the needs of students, I was painfully reminded that our inability to effectively resist the barrage of converging education and urban development policies proved deadly to our process. The board process existed outside of traditional classroom spaces, and represented an attempt to support an alternative model to challenge traditional high stakes testing and irrelevant curriculum. Nevertheless, some of the former board members remain comrades and we continue to work with each other on educational projects inside and external to traditional educational outlets. This experience, although maddening at times, equipped us with the tools to strengthen our work as educators who are concerned with issues of social justice. The places we occupy continue to operate as contested spaces, but our ability to reflect, resist, plan, and persist will stand as testament to our support of education as the process by which we can change how we think, talk, and act.

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