

Special Issue
Educator Activism in Publicly Financed Times
Editorial
Ann Aronoff, Barbara Diefenbach, and Ryan Heester
• We Are Victorious: Educator Activism as a Shared Struggle
for Human Being
• Constructive Learning: Engaging for Action and Activism—A
Personal and Professional Reflection on How Activists
• Resistance and Disruption in Academic Activism: Calling
Ruler
• Mutual Engagement in Spaces of Tension: Working With
Change Toward Activist Action Multiple Contexts
• Democratic School Education: Resisting Public Education
in a Public Space in an Era of Neoliberalism

KAPPA DELTA PI 

ISSN: 0013-1725 (Print) 1938-8098 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/utef20>

We Are Victorious: Educator Activism as a Shared Struggle for Human Being

Carolina Valdez, Edward Curammeng, Farima Pour-Khorshid, Rita Kohli,
Thomas Nikundiwe, Bree Picower, Carla Shalaby & David Stovall


To cite this article: Carolina Valdez, Edward Curammeng, Farima Pour-Khorshid, Rita Kohli,
Thomas Nikundiwe, Bree Picower, Carla Shalaby & David Stovall (2018) We Are Victorious:
Educator Activism as a Shared Struggle for Human Being, *The Educational Forum*, 82:3, 244-258,
DOI: [10.1080/00131725.2018.1458932](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2018.1458932)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2018.1458932>



Published online: 13 Jun 2018.



Submit your article to this journal 



View related articles 



View Crossmark data 

We Are Victorious: Educator Activism as a Shared Struggle for Human Being

Carolina Valdez 

*College of Education, California State University,
Fullerton, Fullerton, California, USA*

Edward Curammeng 

*Division of Teacher Education, California State University,
Dominguez Hills, Carson, California, USA*

Farima Pour-Khorshid

*Department of Education, University of California, Santa
Cruz, Santa Cruz, California, USA*

Rita Kohli

*Graduate School of Education, University of California,
Riverside, Riverside, California, USA*

Thomas Nikundiwe

Education for Liberation Network, Detroit, Michigan, USA

Bree Picower

*College of Education and Human Services, Montclair State
University, Montclair, New Jersey, USA*

Carla Shalaby

*School of Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor,
Michigan, USA*

David Stovall

University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Abstract

This article shares national models of educational activism that center the experiences of People of Color but are diverse in that they serve students, parents,

We Are Victorious

preservice teachers, teachers, and/or community educators and meet frequently in small groups or annually/biannually. Included narratives embody the humanization process, and situate that in the purpose of each project. Our aim is to complicate and extend the definition of activism as a shared struggle for the right to feel human.

Key words: *decolonial pedagogy, education for liberation, educator activism, social justice, teachers of color.*

On March 26, 2017, Victorious Swift was fatally shot on his way home from a studio where he was recording his latest raps.

He was 19 years old.

Despite his age, Victorious was already an accomplished artist—a talented student of architecture at the Baltimore Design School, a skilled graphic designer, and an aspiring musician. Victorious was also a learned boxer and mixed martial artist. And, working with others like himself in the Baltimore Algebra Project, he was a generous tutor of mathematics, a student organizer, and a fierce activist for justice.

“My name is Victory Swift,” begins Victorious’s mother. Known also as Mama Victory, she has graced our conference, Free Minds Free People (FMFP), with her presence. More than 1,000 educators, community organizers, scholars, artists, young people, and parents are gathered at FMFP, convened biannually by the Education for Liberation Network. The purpose of the conference and network is to bring activists from across the country together to build a movement to develop and promote education as a tool for liberation.

The 2017 conference was held in Baltimore and organized in partnership with the young people of the Baltimore Algebra Project. The national, all-volunteer organizing committee decided to dedicate the conference in honor of Victorious; its theme was “Fighting for Our Lives.” The program, T-shirts, signage, and website all signaled his memory by reminding us that in this shared fight for our lives—for our freedom, for our humanity, and for schools more worthy of our children—“*we are Victorious.*”

The authors of this collective work are all connected through the Education for Liberation Network. Several of us met first through this network, connecting in person at FMFP every two years over the past decade, and staying connected through shared activist projects in different cities across the country. We are teachers and teacher educators, researchers and advocates, writers and readers, and we are also human beings in the many other parts of our lives—sisters and brothers, aunts and cousins, friends and partners, sons and daughters, parents and caretakers. For us, FMFP offers a space to bring all the parts of our selves to our shared, common project of imagining and enacting education as freedom.

Valdez et al.

Mama Victory sits behind the registration and information table, welcoming people to our space with her signature smile, and directing them as needed. Those of us working the table get to know her well over the three days. For Mama Victory, too, FMFP offers space for her whole self. She tells us the stories of all seven of her children, of her own childhood, and of her work in the world both before and after the death of her son.

Participating in all the parts of the conference, Mama Victory offers her comments in the question-and-answer portion of an opening plenary panel on “radical healing.” Following a question from an audience member about how to know whether we are all “living fully,” to a packed room of hundreds she gives her own response:

My name is Victory Swift. And to answer your question, beloved, you are living fully. We all do one of two things: we live life, or we take it. This is ours. In this room is some of the greatest people I don't know. Absolutely, phenomenally, some of the greatest people I've never met. And to know that there are people out here that are fighting, fighting, fighting, for change, for our future, for our children, for our lives, I am honored and I am humbled. [...] We were made for this. This is our battle, this is our struggle. And we will win. It may not be in our lifetimes but I promise you, we will take this, and will win it.

She goes on:

My son was murdered on March 26 of this year. Victorious Swift. He put 15 years of his life into advocacy. My baby started advocating at 4 years old. He was telling grown folk what to do. Do you understand? And on March 26, Sunday morning, I felt someone took—stole—my joy. But they didn't. Because we are still Victorious. And we will be Victorious.

Fist in the air, Mama Victory brought the house to its feet and to tears. She embodied “radical healing” (a healing process of nurturing strong relationships and racial identities among education activists while simultaneously developing political consciousness that leads to action inside and outside the classroom; see Ginwright, 2015) and modeled it for us. And as we said our goodbyes to her at the end of FMFP, she told us that the conference was the first time since her son's death that she “got to feel human.” In this way, the gathering itself is a form of activism, an opportunity for healing, and its own kind of victory.

Activism—particularly in these politically polarized times—is generally framed as resistance *against*. Responding to ongoing assaults on young people and to their teachers, families, schools, and communities, educator activists often find themselves reacting through both organized and individual forms of resistance. In this work, however, we propose a conception of educator activism as *struggle for* rather than only *resistance against*. This conception is useful in at least two ways for our purposes. First, it draws collective attention to the fact that the activist activities we describe are not a reactionary response to any isolated politically polarized moment in time. Because we understand this regime as a predictable manifestation of this country's historic and ongoing commitment to patriarchy, to White supremacy, and to settler colonialism, our activism cannot merely be resistance to the current regime. If this activism is any kind of resistance, it is resistance to the original

violence that made way for this particular political moment: the theft of labor and of land, and the systematic project of dehumanization that justifies and allows such theft.

Second, and related, framing our diverse snapshots of educator activism as a *struggle for* allows for a coherent narrative that transcends individual stories of resistance to individual assaults, providing instead a common thread that ties our work together in a single, shared project of struggle. That is, although each resists different forms of assault in our various communities and activist projects, we all struggle for a common, collective purpose. This single, shared purpose is *human being*, which we use here as a verb rather than a noun. In other words, we offer a conception of educator activism as the struggle for the inalienable right of all people to *human be*—to be liberated from any project of violence that treats persons as property, persons as things, persons as disposable, or persons as in any other way less than fully human.

In this article, we share models of educational activism from across the country that center the experiences of People of Color but are diverse in that they focus locally and/or nationally; serve students, parents, preservice teachers, teachers, and/or community educators; and meet frequently in small groups or annually/biannually in a larger community. Because each project is responsive to a particular context, each snapshot embeds literature that helps to situate its purpose. We also include a narrative that embodies the humanization process of the space, and situate that in the purpose of each project or organization. Through our descriptions, we aim to complicate and extend the definition of *activism* as a shared struggle for the right to get to feel human.

The introduction includes a snapshot of the national organization FMFP contributed by Thomas Nikundiwe and Carla Shalaby. The five following snapshots are of projects and organizations that have collaborated with FMFP: the Oakland, California-based group Healing, Empowerment, Love, Liberation, and Action (H.E.L.L.A.), contributed by Farima Pour-Khorshid; the national professional development space, the Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice (ITOC), contributed by Rita Kohli; the teacher education program in New Jersey, The Newark Teachers Project contributed by Bree Picower; the Los Angeles-based teacher collective, The People's Education Movement, Los Angeles contributed by Carolina Valdez and Edward Curammeng; and The Ethnic Studies Teacher's Collective in Chicago contributed by David Stovall.

Our hope is that by seeing a wide range of projects in a wide range of places that experience a wide range of opportunities and constraints, readers will forge an imagination of what is possible in their own particular locations. Our second hope, though, is that readers will also leave this collection of snapshots with some clear, coherent view of what it looks like to struggle for human being. To that end, each snapshot will articulate the particular ways in which the activist project was fundamentally and centrally a project of humanization—a project of building relationships, of healing one another, of teaching and learning love, and of relating to one another in revolutionary ways that refuse to treat persons as objects or as throwaways. Our position, in short, is that any effort to organize with others to resist an assault should be understood as an effort to organize with others to insist on human being.

Valdez et al.

H.E.L.L.A.: Centering “Radical Vulnerability and Soul Care” as an Act of Political and Pedagogical Warfare

Nita, a Vietnamese high school teacher in her late twenties, came to the United States with her family at age 10. She grew up in East Oakland, where she is proud to still live and teach. Her high school classroom is located in the same plaza as Oakland’s Fruitvale Bay Area Rapid Transit station where Oscar Grant, a 22-year-old Black young man, was fatally shot by police officer Johannes Mehserle while facing the ground and handcuffed in 2009. Every month our H.E.L.L.A. Educators of Color group meets in Nita’s classroom and sit in circle right next to a huge mural of Oscar’s face, which is beside several posters of young People of Color who have lost their lives to police terror in the Bay Area and her students’ essays analyzing Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

One of our H.E.L.L.A. rituals is ending our nightly meetings by sharing appreciations for one another and for our space. For example, right before ending our meeting in February 2016, Catalia, a mixed-race Latinx juvenile hall and community-based educator, began to cry as she shared,

I want to appreciate everyone’s heart, everyone here just has so much heart for getting through what you’ve gone through and particularly for your commitment to young people, and just all the heart that you bring to your day-to-day work. I feel hella grateful for this space, today wasn’t quite as bad as yesterday but I really, really, really hate my job and I feel invisible every day. I sit in a concrete room and I’m belittled by White men and none of my community cultural wealth is in play or valued and none of it is asked about. I’m also in a very financially stressful place right now, this [meeting] is not gonna help me pay my rent this month but I feel rich just hearing you, I feel so much more abundant and blessed. They are sad and soulless in their shallow worlds and I’m blessed to have this space because this is where my work starts, you know?

Karina, a mixed-race Latinx high school teacher, community organizer, and university instructor, waited a few moments after passing Catalia tissues and shared,

You know, I was thinking about how half of our agendas have been around community building and this sense of connection and how it makes so much sense why this is a safe space for us. This is such an emotionally intelligent group of people and so I want to appreciate the balance of us being kind of half support group and half study group because that’s what we need in the kind of world we live in, a safe space like this is what we all need.

Jedaiah, a Filipino transgender community-based educator working in a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth organization, constantly struggled with teaching in the context of rapid gentrification and White-dominated nonprofit social justice-based organizations in San Francisco. He said:

Yeah, I definitely feel hella grounded by our process of storytelling because I feel like I enter so many spaces on a daily basis where it’s easy for me to feel invalidated because of certain expectations related to Whiteness, especially when I enter classroom spaces or nonprofit spaces where folks talk in certain ways that just aren’t real. So, thank you everyone for being so raw, so real, and so honest.

We Are Victorious

In Northern California, the term *hella* is synonymous with words such as “very” or “many,” but more importantly, the word serves as a signifier of Bay Area lingo, culture, and identity. This word, however, is not one that would be considered palatable in academia, or any professional setting for that matter. As a working-class, biracial, bilingual womxn of Color who barely graduated high school and who proudly still lives and teaches in my ‘hood, I’ve always had a complicated relationship with my professional identity as a teacher, as a PhD student, and as an emerging scholar. However, inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa, I deliberately centered the word *hella* in my own research and scholarship because “what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us [and] it is vital that we occupy theorizing space. [...] [B]y bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space” (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxv). In the spirit of transforming and reimagining what critical learning spaces should be like, we proudly utilize the term *hella* as an acronym for our personal, political, and pedagogical commitments to Healing, Empowerment, Love, Liberation, and Action (H.E.L.L.A.) as liberatory praxis rooted in radical self and collective care.

While our group is situated within a multiracial grassroots social justice teacher organization, we are located in an increasingly gentrified California Bay Area, which impacts the racial demographics at our study groups, events, and conferences often mirroring the U.S. teaching profession, which is dominated by 82% White teachers (Hrabowski & Sanders, 2015). Relying on Critical Professional Development approaches (Kohli, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015), like many other educators of Color around the country, we co-created a racial affinity group space to support, sustain, heal, and empower the most marginalized educators in the field (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Strong, Pittman-Polletta & Vásquez-Garcia, 2017). Our hope was to actively center the racialized struggles that People of Color navigate as practitioners and to build on the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) that we embody and, in so doing, collectively engaged in radical healing approaches (Ginwright, 2015) as a form of resistance and sustainability in our work.

What was originally intended to be only a one-year study group experience is now in its third year. Our monthly meetings consist of practices that allow for our full selves to be seen, heard, and valued. We have deliberately committed to shifting from transactional relationships, where we engage and interact with one another based on our identities as practitioners, to transformational relationships, which center our full humanity in our learning and interactions together (Ginwright, 2015). We share laughs, tears, rage, hope, and healing through our art-making, our *testimonio* writing, and our critical dialogue together.

Through writing our own *testimonios*, we have centered our struggles, resistance, and resilience as social justice educators of Color and, through our storytelling, we identified collective themes that developed a sense of solidarity and collectivism among our group (Pour-Khorshid, 2016). Because we also believe that creativity and joy are central to our healing, our art creations have included racial life maps, intersectional teacher maps, and zines illustrating the ways that we embody the H.E.L.L.A. tenets in our personal and teaching lives. Our critical dialogues, check-ins, and connections have always been a central pedagogical practice that empowers us to trust ourselves and to reclaim our own experiences in ways that help to redefine who we are and what we do, beyond the confines of White supremacy.

Valdez et al.

Centering the belief that our physical health is also a matter that must be taken seriously among educators of Color, we are now expanding our collective healing efforts by creating “H.E.L.L.A. People’s On the Run,” a grassroots organization collaboration between the Teachers 4 Social Justice multiracial organization and the People’s Education Movement organization in the Bay Area, which is another Teachers of Color (TOC) grassroots organization committed to decolonial praxis. The purpose of this collaboration was to create opportunities for educators/organizers of Color to heal collectively, network, and build together while engaging in mindful meditation and yoga, walking, jogging, or running together monthly around Oakland’s Lake Merritt.

Beginning with the premise that TOC already embody the brilliance and self-determination necessary to be the change we wish to see within ourselves, our communities, and ultimately our society, we collectively cultivated a space that centered all of the Black and Brown magic that we embody. We believe that our H.E.L.L.A. tenets and practices intentionally aim to disrupt toxic call-out cultures, politics of disposability and divisiveness, as well as unhealthy norms of activism that ultimately put our collective liberation at risk. Our intersectional identities and experiences also highlighted our need for a loving space to grapple with our own blind spots as critically conscious educators committed to lifelong learning. Our work together has essentially served as a sacred space created for and by educators of Color to engage in radical vulnerability in order to heal from racial trauma and to reimagine our movement through the lens of emotional, physical, and spiritual wellness.

Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice: The Healing Power of Critical Literacy

Bernice was one of the only Spanish-speaking Latinx teachers in a juvenile hall reentry school serving a high population of Latinx English learner students. As a teacher who felt in deep community with the youths in her context, the deaths of multiple students during the year took a significant toll on her. The school administration, however, was unmoved by the loss of life of young people, stating that it was “just what they do to each other,” and “part of the job.” They told Bernice that if she was going to feel such a connection to the students, teaching was probably not for her. At the end of the year, she felt drained by and disappointed in the education system, and was left questioning her place as a teacher.

That summer, Bernice attended the ITOC, a professional development space designed to shift focus from Whiteness (e.g., White teachers, White administrators, Eurocentric curricula) toward the self-determination of TOC as leaders in their own schools and communities. She was engaged in a structural critique of racism in schools, and for the first time learned of the critical race concept *racial battle fatigue*—“the psychological, emotional, physiological, energy, and time-related cost of fighting against racism” (Smith, 2009, p. 298). In a community dialogue within the convening, Bernice stood up and shared the isolation and self-doubt she faced as a justice-oriented educator. Being in the like-minded community of ITOC with access to critical language helped her to reframe what she had understood as personal, physical, and psychological struggles instead as racial battle fatigue from fighting to maintain humanity within the dehumanizing culture of her school. Reminded that student trauma and loss *should* emotionally impact everyone, she was able to regain her sense of purpose as a critically conscious educator.

K–12 TOC are severely underrepresented in the field and leave the profession at a rate 24% higher than White teachers (Ingersoll & May, 2011). That attrition has been attributed to various factors that include isolation and the hostile racial climate of working in a predominantly White profession (Amos, 2016; Kohli, 2016). TOC have reported feeling racialized, intellectually and pedagogically questioned, overlooked for leadership opportunities (Kohli, 2016), and as we see with Bernice, made to feel like an outsider to the profession. For TOC who engage in educational activism, their isolation and attrition are further exacerbated by limited access to spaces that center their politics *and* their positionalities (Pour-Khorshid, 2016).

IIOC reframes educational leadership and activism through the epistemologies of TOC and their vision to reimagine education. Developed as a professional development community, it actively seeks to strengthen TOC activist networks, critical literacies, and self-determination for a more racially just and humanizing educational system. To move beyond reactionary or individualized methods of intervention, IIOC also asks TOC to develop methodological, data-driven approaches to change as they reimagine schooling. They are prompted to systematically reflect on issues at their school sites or districts by considering any barriers, allies, and resources as they develop racial justice actions that they plan to implement during the school year. Teachers have developed actions that have ranged in purpose, including the development of ethnic studies courses, facilitating professional development toward transformative justice models of discipline, and the cultivation of critical inquiry groups with local teachers.

TOC who attend IIOC have described it as a place of healing, particularly because they are part of a collective with a common purpose in the profession and they strengthened their tools as they strive for racial justice. Many IIOC teachers report entering the next school year feeling rejuvenated, empowered, and connected to networks, including the other teacher activist organizations outlined in this article. After attending IIOC for several years, Bernice wrote,

Each summer [...] I have entered battered and exited put back together—no longer questioning my own sanity. No longer feeling alone and isolated—at peace with the struggle that always awaits me after the summer and strengthened by the love and commitment that these like-minded people show.

As with Bernice, IIOC aims to remind TOC of their power to restore humanity within the education of students of Color.

The Newark Teacher Project: Silence and Voice in the Journey of Educator Activists

“So how was the workshop?”

Jessica paused, looking for the words to share her experience. A college senior and preservice teacher, Jessica had just finished a workshop at the Free Minds Free People conference that she attended with other students from the Newark Teacher Project.

Valdez et al.

“It was, well ... it was ...” As tears spilled down her face, Jessica hesitated, trying to describe the ice-breaker in the workshop she just left, facilitated by previously incarcerated youth. “They asked us to take turns with a partner, a stranger, talking about a point in our life where we had felt dehumanized. We weren’t allowed to speak when the other person was talking—we just had to listen, and we had to use up three minutes each. I’m so quiet and I never talk, so it was hard, but good.”

It wasn’t until later that Jessica shared with me the memory she told her partner. She had gone to see an academic advisor about becoming a math teacher, who had told her she would never make it and to try something easier—“something more on your level.” Jessica said, “I shared my story with this stranger. I wondered, is it because I’m a girl? Latina? In that one minute, I realized how many times I was dehumanized, treated less than because of someone else’s definition of a rightful human being.”

For many justice-oriented students, particularly students of Color like Jessica, teacher education can be a dehumanizing experience. In a profession that is 82% White (Hrabowski & Sanders, 2015), candidates of Color often find themselves as the only, or one of few, students of Color in their teacher education courses. Facing micro- and macro-aggressions from classmates and professors (Kohli, 2009), racism’s role in education is either not brought up, or discussions are geared toward teaching White students that racism exists. For many justice-minded candidates, the journey to teaching becomes more about surviving, with few opportunities to be prepared as educator activists.

The Newark Teacher Project (NTP) at Montclair State University is an attempt to break this pattern. NTP is a small cohort of teacher candidates built around a model of caring relationships, racial justice, and love to prepare urban educators to create liberatory spaces in their classrooms and to stand up to patterns of oppression. Students are recruited into NTP for their clinical year from the traditional elementary program based on their passion for urban teaching and social justice.

Students have taken most of their coursework prior to beginning in NTP, which is often apolitical at best. As Nelly described,

I sit through a whole master’s program, and haven’t talked about race when we know schools were built and continue to maintain institutional racism. How can you prepare teachers and not teach them how to deal with trauma and the generational effects of racism on students, and then teach us classroom management skills that end up criminalizing our students for just surviving?

Nelly names the silence around racism as a direct way in which teachers are situated to perpetuate oppression.

For students like Nelly, a biracial Newark resident, spoken word poet, and educator, teacher education has also been an experience of just surviving—a space where her voice and brilliance have not been valued. NTP is designed for such students who approach education with a different mindset, one of political engagement and social justice. The cohort members’ shared values, often not present in their previous classes, create a tight-knit community where they get to know each other as holistic people, not just as classmates.

Daily group texts, nights out, sleepovers, laughs, and tears quickly become part of the NTP experience.

This sense of community allows the members to bring their full humanity to the table, which in turn deepens the level of openness and discourse among the group, particularly around issues of race. Experiences and coursework are designed to develop their political analysis so that they can use their voices to counter injustice. Nelly shared,

I think of the Audre Lorde quote, “Your silence will not protect you,” and how this program continues to transform our silence and expose our quietness on topics we thought we had raised our voice for. NTP challenges our comfort in choosing to be an expert outraged spectator. [...] NTP made it clear that the simple naming of these inequities without action is a direct way we maintain White supremacy.

As a spoken word artist, someone who quite literally uses her voice as a way to share experiences and connect with others, Nelly acknowledges the role that NTP plays in moving from quietness to outrage to action as future educator activists.

In reflection, Jessica shared, “NTP gave me back my voice. It’s a constant reminder to wake up and stop believing the racist notions put in front of me.” Jessica named the value of participating in the critical professional development (PD) events (Kohli et al., 2015) that are part of NTP, such as Undoing Racism and Free Minds Free People. “These workshops provided me with the historical background of racism. [...] With that knowledge, I am able to grow, learn more, and remind myself and our children that we are more than enough.” Jessica applies this historical knowledge directly to her third-grade student-teaching classroom:

It is having conversations with young children, telling them their skin, hair, body, mind, and soul is beautiful. It is having conversations with others, telling them to stop putting us in a box. It is talking more and louder so THEY can hear us. But it is also listening and understanding the pain and frustration in our voices. NTP creates that safe space, the space to stand up for ourselves and others.

Jessica, who previously self-identified as a quiet non-talker, acknowledges the role that a loving, humanizing, and racially conscious space within teacher education provided her in both affirming her voice and using it “to stand up for ourselves and others.”

People’s Education Movement: Situating Survivance for Teacher Organizers

I hurried into an ethnic studies classroom at a high school in South Central Los Angeles, five minutes south from my school site. Posters showcasing students’ stencil artwork of various freedom fighters lined the wall: Assata, Audre Lorde, and Oscar Romero, to name a few. It was Saturday morning and I was not particularly excited for this meeting but knew that I needed to be there. It was our council meeting, the governing body of People’s Ed, which we founded two summers before. We started the meeting with a circle because we had a hard time communicating as a council this year and it was clear we were all going through struggles that were affecting our cohesiveness as a leadership. When the talking piece got to me, I echoed what several others before me had shared: “I’m

Valdez et al.

having a rough time right now at my school site. I know I haven't been present in People's the way I should and I'm thinking about resigning."

"I'm really concerned hearing you say that," shared a council member. "Maybe because I've never seen you struggle. You're always on top of things, your teaching and organizing."

"You have never seen me like this because I have never felt like this. I'm having a harder time this year than I had my first year teaching." I felt demoralized this year; more so than I ever had teaching within LAUSD [Los Angeles Unified School District], and my school site and administrator had everything to do with it. It was not burnout or not having what it takes to teach; I have what it takes to teach, which is why I was successful at my previous three school sites. I was demoralized, feeling like no matter what I did, it was not good enough at this school. Between building curriculum for the new Common Core standards, navigating student behavior, and dehumanizing interactions with my administrator, I was exhausted.

The council asked me not to resign and assured me that it is always rough this time of year and that things would ease up after October passed. We closed out the circle and jumped into the planning of our upcoming general meeting and shared updates of our working group projects. Despite leadership within the organization adding more work to my already full plate, the organization also provided the much-needed support in maintaining my sanity and well-being, as well as in sustaining my teaching practice—support that I was not receiving from my school site or the district. (Ms. Vee, fifth-grade teacher)

The People's Education Movement (People's Ed) was created in the summer of 2012 in Los Angeles because educators felt the need for a teacher organization that centered the voices and experiences of historically marginalized peoples, including People of Color, womxn, and queer communities. Thus, the founding members gathered to develop a space for educators centering love and healing while organizing against colonialism. With a shared understanding that schooling was created to colonize and dehumanize communities of Color, the organization set out to disrupt colonial schooling with the proactive creation of liberatory spaces for youth. The collective also understood that colonial schooling dehumanizes educators, and created Teacher Survival Programs to support educators so that they had the capacity to engage in political campaigns.

People's Ed created goals to center ethnic studies curricula and pedagogies (Curammeng, Lopez, Tintiangco-Cubales, 2016; Valdez, 2017), transformative justice, the development of critical networks to support educators, and the creation of autonomous spaces that reflect the interests of the community. This translated into specific committees and programs like monthly Teacher Inquiry Groups, where Ms. Vee and others could develop, share, and receive feedback on ethnic studies curricula. This space pushed back on the sterile and often uncritical, ahistorical PD members received from their respective schools that failed to center PD within a political context and to actively engage reflection and action necessary to improve their pedagogy (Martinez, Valdez, & Cariaga, 2016).

The collective carried their experiences and understandings of contradictions from other organizations to outline a code of conduct and sexual boundaries for all members.

We Are Victorious

We were determined to develop internal procedures to address harm, heal, and grow. Additionally, we created a wellness committee to support the incorporation of meditation and mindfulness into meetings and events, and offered activities that encouraged movement, local wellness resources, and a reconnection to Earth.

With the above teacher survival programs to support educators like Ms. Vee in their teaching and wellness, members engaged in proactive political campaigns led by the community outreach committee. The support received from the organization allowed Ms. Vee to be able to help organize the People's "Summer Freedom School" in South Central Los Angeles. The school served sixth- through 12th-graders, including several of Ms. Vee's students, and utilized ethnic studies art as resistance.

Since its founding, People's Ed has remained committed to responding to the needs of its members and the larger community it serves. It was the feeling of solidarity *with* People's that the many educators who attend our meetings leave with and contribute to the organization. It is because of these ongoing reflective and intentional relationships we are building that the movement of and for the People's continues. We do so with deep commitments to one another's healing and humanity by being accountable to and for one another. As Ms. Vee stated,

The organization helped me survive the year, not as a novice teacher but as an experienced teacher that knew I would not receive the support I needed from the school district, and so I collaborated with others to create it.

The Ethnic Studies Teacher's Collective: Love, Ethnic Studies, and the Struggle for Self-Determination

Over the last two years I have been humbled by a request from a collective of teacher educators, classroom teachers, preservice teachers, and community organizers to join in the struggle to define ourselves on our own terms (self-determination) in very trying times. As a multiracial/ethnic collective of Black, Latinx, Arab American, and Asian American educators and organizers, we make an explicit claim to our humanity through a process of self-determination that is rooted in a politic of love. In all its challenges, we take Ernesto "Che" Guevara's point to heart in that true revolutionaries are motivated by feelings of love. As a collective of ethnic studies educators, we understand that our space operates as a fugitive one, in that we openly reject "schooling" (order and compliance for arbitrary rewards) in its traditional sense, understanding that the concept remains rooted in the subordination and dehumanization of People of Color. Education for us includes the process of asking critical questions of our conditions while building practices to change them. Because we originate from the myriad of perspectives and experiences, we do not offer a prescriptive pathway toward self-determination in our work. Instead, we seek to speak and live our truths through a process of centering our forms of knowledge and praxis as valid, necessary, and invaluable to each other.

Our work takes place in Chicago, one of the ground zeroes for corporate educational "reforms." These shifts include but are not limited to mayoral control, mass school closings,

Valdez et al.

the proliferation of corporate charter school networks, attacks on teachers and the teachers' union, and the defunding of public education. As these neoliberal corporate reforms have been touted as positive (for some), they actually result in the further marginalization of poor and working-class communities of Color. In partnership with the Mayor's Office of the City of Chicago, the Chicago Public Schools administration works vehemently to justify the disposability of low-income/no-income Black and Latinx families. As our city becomes unlivable for the most marginalized, it relishes its newly found amenities for the affluent. Given this reality, our formation of radical educators has taken it upon ourselves to think, create, and build with each other.

We situate our work in previous local and national struggles for ethnic studies. As artists, activists, educators, parents, and students echoed these demands throughout the Chicago area and across the country, our present understanding of ethnic studies is guided by the histories of those impacted by structural/institutional violence and the struggle to free themselves from it.

A recent example of our work is when a member of the collective alerted the group about an issue she had in class. During a lesson, she was using the terms Black and African American. One of her students (a Black male) was visibly upset. After class he explained that he preferred African American more than Black. She alerted our collective of this instance via text message. Within three minutes of her text, there were two responses, one that suggested that she get an understanding for his distaste for the word Black. The idea is that if we could locate his aversion to the term, she could provide him with positive examples in current and historical movement-based struggles that uplift the term Black and challenge its association with negativity. Another suggestion was for her to have him team-teach a unit on the term with her, allowing him and his classmates to see a tangible example of critical pedagogy in the form of suspending the idea of teacher as the sole expert in class. Because of our commitment to work in this collective, both the immediacy and care taken in the response is reflective of our work to struggle together.

Where this is one (and a rather rapid) example, we continue to struggle for the right to speak for ourselves instead of being spoken for by others, and to center our work in radical healing and humanization. This includes a slower process that demands of us not only to confront the external forces that harm us but also to confront our internal struggles with pervasive Whiteness, internalized oppression, homo/transphobia, toxic masculinity, rape culture, and displaced anger. Throughout our journey, we have questioned, debated, and come to the resolution that our version of ethnic studies is not the traditional, institutionalized version of including contributions of People of Color to the U.S. school curriculum. Instead our commitment is to invigorate an ethnic studies movement in Chicago, as an intervention to the miseducation enacted upon us within K-20 systems of schooling in the United States and abroad. Ethnic studies for us is rooted in our courage and work toward self-determination so we can become better versions of ourselves. We work in this way so we can return to our education and organizing spaces reenergized to continue the struggle to claim our humanity alongside our students and communities.

Closing Words

There are highly visible aspects of education activism that generally garner the most attention, whether in academic writing or more public forms of media. The things that education activists *do* are most often highlighted, broadcasted, and studied: marching together in protest, crowd-sourcing and writing curricula that respond to a political event, organizing teach-ins and other critical professional development for justice educators, engaging in campaigns to win particular school reforms. Although we engage all of these types of activities (and more) in our organizations and spaces, the things we *do* are not at the center of the snapshots we offer here.


Instead, we hoped to focus the narrative lens on *how we be* in the work that we do; that is, our striving for spaces of activism that operate from a shared commitment to allowing one another to *human be*. We hoped to capture the less visible aspects of education activism that undergird our public efforts—the ways we be together in order to heal ourselves and others, to create and sustain authentic community, and to foreground love. So rather than write about any particular activities we engaged in in response to the most recent presidential election, we instead choose to highlight how we returned to our already existing spaces, exchanged hugs with our people, and continued our long-term, historically rooted, already-in-action work to heal ourselves and others, and to imagine and enact education as freedom.

It is important to explicitly note that the work we describe here all centered on the experiences of people of Color. People of Color are not at the margins of these spaces. These are largely spaces first imagined by People of Color, created by and for People of Color, and led by People of Color. None of the people who organize together in these projects get to spend all their time in such spaces. Quite the contrary, we spend the majority of our time in hostile, majority-White schools and institutions where assaults to *human being* are everyday occurrences. We try to create and sustain the activist communities we describe here not (just) as resistance to those assaults—not just as sanctuary from them—but as spaces imagined and created for us and by us where we can practice the struggle for our right to *human be*. The point is that we are trying to imagine anew, and to build for ourselves and for one other.

Because these are activist spaces of practice and of struggle, we do not always succeed in our efforts to heal ourselves and others, or in our core effort to create parallel sanctuaries in which we can collectively struggle for freedom and love. Rather, we sometimes fall down in our efforts, and we misstep by ourselves, reproducing the logics of dehumanization in our interactions with one another and in our work. We offer this collective piece as a reminder not just to others but also to ourselves that activist work can and must focus a commitment on how we be, not just what we do. In *that* struggle—in the continued practice of how we human be—we find our way toward becoming Victorious.

ORCID

Carolina Valdez  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4187-7282>

Edward Currameng  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2002-999X>

References

- Amos, Y. T. (2016). Wanted and used: Latina bilingual education teachers at public schools. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 49*(1), 41–56. doi:10.1080/10665684.2015.1122557
- Anzaldúa, G. (Ed.). (1990). *Making face, making soul: Haciendo Caras. Creative and critical perspectives by women of color*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Curammeng, E. R., Lopez, D. D., & Tintiango-Cubales, A. (2016). Community responsive literacies: The development of the Ethnic Studies Praxis Story Plot. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique, 15*(3), 411–429. doi:10.1108/ETPC-01-2016-0016
- Ginwright, S. (2015). *Hope and healing in urban education: How urban activists and teachers are reclaiming matters of the heart*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hrabowski, F. A., III, & Sanders, M. G. (2015, Winter). Increasing racial diversity in the teacher workforce: One university's approach. *Thought & Action, 101*–116.
- Ingersoll, R. M., & May, H. (2011). The minority teacher shortage: Fact or fable? *Phi Delta Kappan, 93*(1), 62–65. doi:10.1177/003172171109300111
- Kohli, R. (2009). Critical race reflections: Valuing the experiences of teachers of color in teacher education. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 12*(2), 235–251. doi:10.1080/13613320902995491
- Kohli, R. (2016). Behind school doors: The impact of hostile racial climates on urban teachers of color. *Urban Education, 53*(3), 307–333. doi:10.1177/0042085916636653
- Kohli, R., Picower, B., Martinez, A. N., & Ortiz, N. (2015). Critical professional development: Centering the social justice needs of teachers. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, 6*(2), 7–24.
- Kohli, R., & Pizarro, M. (2016). Fighting to educate our own: Teachers of color, relational accountability and the struggle for racial justice. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 49*(1), 72–84. doi:10.1080/10665684.2015.1121457
- Martinez, A., Valdez, C., & Cariaga, S. (2016). Solidarity with the people: Organizing to disrupt teacher alienation. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 49*(3), 300–313. doi:10.1080/10665684.2016.1194104
- Pour-Khorshid, F. (2016). H.E.L.L.A.: Collective testimonio that speak to the healing, empowerment, love, liberation, and action embodied by social justice educators of color. *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal, 10*(2), 16–32.
- Smith, W. A. (2009). Campuswide climate: Implications for African American students. In L. C. Tillman (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of African American education* (pp. 297–309). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Strong, L., Pittman-Polletta, M., & Vásquez-Garcia, D. (2017). Creating racial affinity spaces for educators. In B. Picower & R. Kohli (Eds.), *Confronting racism in teacher education: Counternarratives of critical practice* (pp. 133–138). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Valdez, C. (2017). Subverting scripted language arts curriculum: Ethnic studies literature in the elementary classroom. *Kappa Delta Pi Record, 53*(4), 184–187. doi:10.1080/00228958.2017.1369282
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 8*(1), 69–91. doi:10.1080/1361332052000341006