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The Conversation of Critical Practice: Pre-service Teachers As Educators for Social Justice

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Abstract

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Introduction

The ubiquity of reflection as a vehicle for professional development in teacher education is well established. A common task required of a person enrolled in a teacher education program is the reflective journal or paper, in which she or he is expected to lay out and examine her or his discovery of self-as-teacher. This journal or paper is most frequently written for an audience of two, the pre-service teacher and the teacher education professor who assigned the task, although there are examples of collaborative journaling in the literature (Alterio, 2004). Another common reflective practice is the reflective face-to-face conversation that bubbles up as teacher candidates share their experiences during seminars. Electronic reflections, directed or free-flowing, posted to an online bulletin board or developed in a course chat room augment or sometimes replace face-to-face reflective conversations or traditional journals. The many benefits of such monitored reflection for the well-rounded professional development of the prospective teacher have been well documented, such as the rise of critical consciousness (DeShon Hamlin, 2004; Givens Generett & Hicks, 2004), the development of instructional skills and strategies and the absorption of implicit and necessary cultural knowledge of how to be a teacher (DeWert,

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Babinski, & Jones, 2003; Fenimore-Smith, 2004; Loughran, 2002; Parsons & Stephenson, 2005; Pedro, 2005; Schön, 1983; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Additionally, researchers are noting the value of collaborative reflection for building a sense of community among pre-service teachers (Au, 2002; Woods & Ebersole, 2003).

Using online, collaborative reflection about their field experiences, readings and course learning is what a group of my pre-service teachers chose to do of their own accord during a recent course in developing literacy for elementary students. They began, and sustained as a group, an irresistible extended electronic conversation that taught us all much about ourselves as educators, and as members of a cherished community of practice. In this paper I, the course instructor, examine aspects of this construction, specifically the construction of authentic membership and sense of shared purpose within a professional community of educators for social justice.

Background

During the spring of 2005, I taught a course called Extending Literacy in the Elementary Grades to 14 masters-level teacher-candidates in a small comprehensive New England University. Two of the students were male; ten were white; one was Vietnamese-American, two were African American or African-Caribbean; one was a Korean national attending on a student visa; most were aged between 23 and 35, and all were economically middle or upper middle class. With two exceptions, the teacher-candidates had all previously taken another literacy course. The two exceptions included one highly experienced educator earning a masters' degree in curriculum, and one man of late middle age with previous teaching experience in another country who was seeking to be certified in the state. Although he attended most of our class meetings, this second person did not participate in the electronic conversation under examination, nor did he fulfill any of the formal requirements of the course.

As part of the course requirements, the pre-service teachers spent about two hours per week in upper elementary grade classrooms in local public schools with multiracial populations, high numbers of students on free lunch, and/or significant numbers of students whose first language was other than English.

The teacher-candidates had previously established a pattern of lively email conversation among themselves, which mostly consisted of sharing resources they had discovered to be of use in their course assignments. We had also established a pattern of individual teacher-student communication that included extensive electronic annotation and editing of lesson plans, journals, and other written work, extensive advising and mentoring conversations, and short breezy communiqués from me to the class about interruptions to our schedules, resources, and so on.

Because the teacher candidates' postings to the conversation portray the story of the construction of this professional community far more beautifully than any analysis could, the candidates whose entries are quoted have more than earned their status as co-authors. Seven of the graduate students, the six co-authors of this paper and the experienced educator, offered critique and additional commentary on my analysis of their social construction of professional community. Amy, quiet and thoughtful during our class meetings, emerges as a provocateur online. Morgan, brilliant and talented in her practice, coolly self-reliant in class, reaches out into cyberspace for the reassuring comfort of allies. Abiah, passionate and enthused in person, is passionate and enthused in her missives. Dan, endearingly competitive, always setting himself up at the receiving end of good-

natured, sisterly put-downs from his classmates, sets his colleagues to shine as he engages with sincerity and hope in the conversation. Vonick, so quiet in class, pushes her colleagues to the space of possibilities come true, as she writes about her own work in a school that takes social justice seriously. Carolyn, serious, scholarly and often outraged in class, brings her scholarly perspectives into the online conversation at just the right moments.

Data Analysis

In all, over 300 exchanges among the whole class were generated during the three month long e-conversation, in addition to the full slate of ordinary email generated between us. Although the conversation as a whole captures an exhilarating experience, it is messy in the ways that rich, authentic conversation often is. Further, because this was an impromptu email discussion that spilled over from the face-to-face conversations of the course, and because I did not have the foresight to employ any systematic online discussion tool, the e-conversation was messy in the ways that email correspondence among multiple partners can be. For example, the conversation was not visually threaded (Han & Hill, 2006). Its choreography was inelegant.

The whole-class exchanges began on January 29, lapsed for three weeks between February 10-28, resumed on March 1 and ended on April 20. An initial analysis of the conversation found it to be comprised of two significant consecutive conversational topics, lavishly threaded through with recurring asides and negotiations primarily concerned with seeking help or offering advice about course assignments and sharing of resources. After the lapse, the conversation shifted from a discussion about critical literacy to one that explored critical pedagogy. Eventually, the emails were sorted into four overlapping sub-groups. The first includes the teacher candidates' constructions of, and conversations about, critical literacy. The second, framed as professorial, contains my postings and many of those sent by the experienced educator (Calderwood & D'Amico, 2007). The third group includes the more prosaic exchanges of resources and help with course assignments. The fourth group holds the emails that deepen the initiating conversation/construction of critical literacy into one about critical pedagogy.

In this paper, we use examples from this fourth sub-group of exchanges, although the validity of the analysis of the construction of community necessarily rests upon the cohesion of the entire e-conversation. The exchanges that appear in this paper were posted between March 1 and 29, and accurately represent the order of the conversational turns. In order to present readers with manageable chunks of conversational exchange, some entries are not included; further, most of the quotes that are included are abridged, indicated by ellipses.

Content analysis identified a number of interrelated themes developed during the conversation, such as the nature and value of critical literacy for elementary teachers and their students (the bulk of the first extended exchange), the challenges of critical pedagogy, the value of building solidarity, and the role of social justice in teaching (the stuff of the second extended exchange). In addition, content and discourse analysis identified processes in play, such as the development of critical literacy among the teacher candidates, the negotiation of authority and authenticity between professor and the experienced educator and the social construction of professional community among the group. The value of critical literacy and challenges of critical literacy pedagogy, as they were discussed during the conversation by the teacher candidates and the interplay of authority and authenticity between the experienced educator and course instructor are examined elsewhere (Calderwood & D'Amico, 2007).

Although in this paper, analysis of the construction of identity within a professional community takes prominence, the functions to which varied kinds of postings and varied uses of language were put were multiple. Discourse analysis informed by Han and Hill's study of an online conversation in a graduate teacher education course (2006) informed an understanding of the varied functional uses of affiliative addresses, reflective musings, and of provocative questions and declarations throughout the conversation. The research of Bikowski, (2007), Garrison (2007) and Vaughan and Garrison (2006) on social presence supports interpretations of the ways that the students constructed a sense of community through the online discussion. Luke's 1995/1996 discussion of critical discourse in education has informed the content analysis, and suggestions for understanding the enactment of communities of practice as discussed by Lave and Wenger (1991) have strongly influenced the conversational analysis and our view of it as the tracing of a community of practice. The work of several scholars who have studied the social and cognitive aspects of online conversation in constructing a sense of community (Bikowski, 2007; Garrison, 2007; Han & Hill, 2006; Picciano, 2002; Swan, K. & Shih, 2005) has illuminated aspects of community-building specific to online conversations.

Positive Aspects Of Reflective Conversation

The inherently social design of the reflective journal lends itself easily to the give and take of a collaborative construction of professional development, as many have noted elsewhere (Alterio, 2004; Kim & Lee, 2002; Nicholson & Bond, 2003; Parsons and Stephenson, 2005). In our case, the teacher candidates constructed a unified, virtual reflective journal, where, although authorship of any particular entry could be attributed to a single participant, the ownership of the social constructions of reflection, venting, problem resolution, and establishment of identities as educators for social justice were collective. The intimacy, candor and responsibilities of trusting relations bled through the wires that delivered the conversation to our inboxes. In addition to serving as an ad hoc bulletin board upon which to post questions and share information, our email conversation added opportunity for increasing the amount of in-class time spent on building their instructional strategies and skills, an unanticipated benefit of the rich conversation. In fact, formal and informal student evaluations indicated that most of the class participants doubled, and in some cases, tripled, the amount and quality of time and effort usually spent on course-related work, to their great satisfaction. This was time and effort well spent, according to the teacher-candidates' remarks. Reasons for the high rate of satisfaction included a perceived steep trajectory of professional development, a sense of professional community and solidarity, and a sense that they had contributed to a unique learning experience unlike any they had had before.

The asynchronicity of the electronic format of our ad hoc collaborative reflection not only allowed participants to carefully craft their missives free of the time constraints and turn-taking of our weekly face to face conversations in class, but also provided several of the more reticent teacher-candidates with an appealing opportunity to communicate at greater length with their peers, resonating with effects noted by other teacher educators who utilized electronic communications as part of their course design (Barnett, Dickinson, McDonagh, Merchant, Myers & Wilkinson, 2003; Woods & Ebersole, 2003). For example, Amy, who seldom spoke up in class, was a pivotal conversant in the e-conversation. She liked to listen to the give and take during class, and to take her time thinking about concepts and issues before sharing her thoughts. Her carefully worded comments about missed opportunities for critical pedagogy and her concerns about the political constraints and responsibilities of classroom teachers stirred many of the teacher candidates to respond sensitively and thoughtfully.

For many of us, the intimacy and privacy that can mark a personal conversation with a trusted interlocutor not only survived the leap into the cyberspace we inhabited during our e-conversation, but was markedly more democratic than the ongoing face to face conversation that we maintained when we convened in our classroom. Unlike during our class time, there was conversational room enough, and time enough, for every participant to chime in, if she or he so chose (Bikowski, 2007; Black, 2005; Davis, Lennox, Walker & Walsh, 2007; Turkle & Salamensky, 2001). Further, this cyber-conversation was written in elaborated code rather than in the casual shorthand of instant messaging. Absent the helpful meta-linguistic props of face-to-face conversation, the participants chose to write in full sentences and well connected paragraphs. They quoted each other accurately, sometimes cutting and pasting a generative phrase from a colleague's earlier post into their own remarks. Many of the postings rephrased and then amplified earlier postings, in an e-version of active listening. The examples of elaborated thoughts, evocative examples and interesting questions provided by the more garrulous were also effective in democratizing the conversation, as these modeled an easily assimilated template into which the less articulate could write. With few exceptions, the email postings were formalized with affiliative greetings and leave-takings (Hi everyone; Have a good weekend; See you all on Thursday!), personal, though public, asides (Morgan, I really took what you suggested about mistaking excitement for disobedience to heart; Amy, I too, felt alone in wanting to conquer this and unfortunately I did not feel brave enough in someone else's class to speak up.) and clear connections to earlier postings (Abiah, I agree with what you are saying, but I think that there is a fine line between "talking back" and standing up for oneself.) Within the parameters of the linguistic structures of the conversation, illustrated above, we can read the construction of affiliation, affirmation and constructive critique of professional community.

Within many of the reflective (Han & Hill, 2006) postings of this extended conversation, a deep sense of engaged presence prevails in the confidences shared, the tones of bravado and insecurity that linger between the lines, and in the remarkable length and complexity of many of the postings of the co-authors of this paper. This was supported by growing friendships (Bikowski, 2007) among several of the teacher candidates inside and outside class. The weekly face-to-face class meetings anchored the intimacy (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). This resonates with the recent literature about the nature and importance of social presence online (Garrison, 2007; Picciano, 2002; Swan & Shih, 2005). As their conversational entries built upon one another, the teacher candidates together wrestled with some vexing inconsistencies between their conceptions of themselves as educators for social justice, and the specter of becoming teachers who avoided the critical conversations they had come to value. The email conversation provided an opportunity for the teacher candidates to try on and to perform their anticipated identities as competent teachers, even as they simultaneously identified as neophytes (Cook-Sather, 2006; Turner, 1967). The resolution of the dissonance was a strong impelling force in their construction of themselves as in professional community.

A Conversation Unfolds

Telling evocative stories, as Alterio notes (2004), offers opportunity to hack through thorny problems encountered in practice. In our case, vignettes offered opportunity for the participants to share their fieldwork frustrations and accomplishments, similarly to the function of face-to-face storytelling (Pedro, 2005). However, the e-conversation innovation allowed the conversation prompted by a specific story to flow for days. The written trail beckoned to be retraced and then to be blazed further, begged for the embellishment of

meandering side paths, and was blessed with many a scenic overlook at which the travelers could gather and look both forward and back before continuing the conversational journey.

The following abridged examples from the e-conversation begin with a story from Amy. These pieces illustrates how the pre-service teachers confronted their common dilemma of reconciling theory and practice with regard to opportunities, missed and taken, to support critical literacy among elementary students. They take turns listening and telling, nurturing and exhorting as they work through the puzzle of why teachers don't leap on what they themselves consider obvious and compelling opportunities for critical discussions among their students.

> Amy: I was able to witness in my fieldwork this week a situation where there was a tremendous opportunity for critical thinking and learning to take place. We were discussing colonization, plantations, slavery and the students made comments about it being right or wrong, kind or hurtful, whether war is just etc. and it was apparent the teacher did not want to deal with these issues. She gave one or two-word close-ended comments and moved along to the next sentence or paragraph. In this case not because the curriculum mandated it, but because I feel they were issues she wanted to avoid discussing, and most likely lacked the training on how to appropriately discuss it in the classroom. As a result of her decision, I kind of drifted off in thought as to what I would do in that situation and how Vasquez would recommend proceeding and it was such a fun, exciting, invigorating journey I took. It was just that I was all alone when I took it.

Amy's poignant entry struck a chord with her fellows, a half dozen of whom responded with similar examples of missed opportunities for critical conversations with elementary students. A number of the responses included calls for solidarity in response to Amy's plaintive " It was just that I was all alone." Morgan's response below echoed Amy's frustration, but adds a note of purposeful determination.

> Morgan: I see it all the time, as well...where conversations that occur in the 3rd space do not get taken any further or questions that arise in the context of another lesson are simply placated by a one or two word answer... I just keep realizing how important administration is in all of this. Without a supportive administration you really are all alone in it...or without a job ☺. And as Dr. C suggested, there are so many people and teachers who don't think about these things or think that children can think critically that it will take a lot of work to change the system. But it has to start somewhere.

As we can see, Abiah's subsequent response builds upon Morgan's to generate a possible solution- the building of trusting relations and a sense of community:

> Abiah:... If we build a community of trust with our students and with the other faculty and (of course) with the parents then our attempts to stretch the curriculum and allow our student the freedom to explore their interests and ideas, we will all benefit. ...

Dan's entry, written after reading these and other postings, adds more than a dash of bravado to the discussion. His confidence that this group of teacher candidates will be critical educators is threaded through with an awareness of the challenges that they will face. He brings us back to Amy's classroom teacher with a rueful twist. This is a good teacher, he tells us, who was practicing her profession as she had been taught to do.

> Dan: Great points made so far, and I just had a few comments to add.

> Morgan, I like how you described your philosophy on discipline vs. engagement. We have all read stories where a teacher is giving an exciting lesson and the kids are all up out of their seats, everyone's talking and walking around. If a casual observer were to walk by they would most likely label the class as uncontrolled, wild or undisciplined. BUT WE KNOW BETTER! … But we should be prepared to face and educate those who are not aware of what we are doing…The point you make about administrative support is key. But it also depends on us. Sometimes it is easier to fall into line, to drop our critical curriculum focusing on "hot button" issues. We simply cannot do that. Who knows what I will face when I become my own teacher, but I would like to think that I will not compromise. If given the choice to conform to the model that is predominant in our schools today or risk losing your job, which would you choose? We certainly know which option is easier, but which option is right? I say that if you believe in what you are doing, then do it. In the end we may be proven right, we may be proven wrong, but at least no one will be able to say that we compromised our beliefs
>
> I can relate to Amy's story from her fieldwork, mostly because I was there… Amy, you weren't alone on your train of thought….The fact is, though, that this is a good teacher, a teacher with many years of experience, and as Amy suggested in our discussion after the lesson, she has (most likely) not been exposed to the school of pedagogical thought that we are immersed in. I can't fault her for that, and based on our roles in that classroom, Amy and I can't really challenge her on it either. The time is simply not right. But we can remember it when we become teachers.

Constructing Professional Community

The teacher-candidates in the literacy class, as evidenced by the above excerpts from the larger conversation, were intently engaged in the construction of a community of practice as critical literacy educators. Others have noted similar constructions by pre-service teachers, finding much of value for professional practice (Au, 2002; Poole, 2004). As in all communities of practice, we found ourselves, newcomers and old-timers alike, learning from and teaching each other, reflecting together, gaining competence in the ways of thinking and doing the practices that mark our profession, and finding liminal spaces where the peripheries of expertise and experience were fluid (Calderwood, 2000, 2003; Chaiklin & Lave, 1996; Cook-Sather, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Within the conversation, it is evident that we deliberately, but also unconsciously, constructed parameters of membership inclusion and exclusion, rules for participation (in the conversation), and norms for appropriate activities, values and ways of thinking.

With regard to rules for how to participate within the conversation, as the experienced educator and I took turns consoling and cajoling the disappointed or frustrated writers, our opportunities to affirm our community clearly were different than those for the less experienced teacher candidates. They were free to air their frustrations in turn as affirmation of infuriating field experiences, even to construct a temporary shared misery, but we two found ourselves clutching the megaphones of responsibility to cheer the team on and to reassure them that the misery could be alleviated (Calderwood & D'Amico, 2007). We simply had to be inspired by each other, were compelled to affirm each other, and were thus drawn into the net of our own making, the mesh of community.

With regard to the parameters of membership inclusion, this is quite an extensive community of practice in which the pre-service teachers include themselves. To illustrate,

there was a consistent turn to the experts whose works they have read in this and other classes, a pattern that continued vigorously throughout the extended conversation. For example, Abiah ended one of her postings with a reference to one of the influential practitioners (Vasquez, 2004) whose work inspired the group "...PS - thank you again Vivian Vasquez, for writing a book that shows the world our children can do more than we might expect, and never to try to hold them down, mainly because they won't let us!" Sometimes I or other professors were flatteringly lumped in and quoted with the luminaries, but classroom teachers, although implicitly considered insiders within the professional community, were infrequently referenced as shedding light on the challenges that are discussed. Much more frequently they were held up as instigators or perpetuators of the flaws of formal schooling (Carolyn: I'm still hoping to run into one that I can model). To their credit, these aspiring teachers did not stop short at the first easy space of finger-pointing at the teachers they have encountered, but went on to seek explanations that forced them to grasp the conflicts and complexities of classroom teaching. They fretted about why the teachers seem oblivious to the opportunities to let student inquiry drive curriculum, partly in trepidation that they themselves would face the overwhelming pressures to conform to the lock-step instruction they witnessed.

Significantly, they affirm a sense of collegial community several times. As Dan notes above, Amy was not alone on her train of thought about opportunities missed. He was a frustrated fellow passenger. Although the yeoman's work of writing explicit, enthusiastic affirmation and encouragement was undertaken by Kathleen, the experienced educator (Don't dishearten if a teacher is not willing to take your idea now; just try never to turn into "that" kind of teacher yourself.), entries from Morgan, Dan and Abiah added considerably to the number of affirmations and calls for solidarity. These affirmations of solidarity that arose periodically during the conversations served a number of important purposes for the class. First, they served as an acknowledgment and celebration of the close-knit group they had become (Garrison, 2007; Vaughan & Garrison; 2006). They were strutting their stuff, I suppose (The point is, we know better) - but with a sincerity and sweetness that was filled with genuine affection and respect for each other.

> Dr. C (and all), Could you imagine what it would be like if we were ALL hired to work in the same school? (Dan, March 5)
>
> If we were all hired at the same school our kids would be the most intellectually curious learners ever and, besides all that, we'd kick butt in lacrosse! (Abiah, March 7)
>
> Dan, again, if we all do work at the same school at least we can always call each other out if we notice one of us drifting into a "comfy curriculum" and not challenging ourselves and our students to learn things outside of the lesson plan.
>
> -Abiah (March 9)

A juxtaposition with other pre-service teachers and practicing teachers identifies the participants in the conversation as competent teachers, an imagination of identity that will soon be theirs to claim uncontested (Atkinson, 2004; Cook-Sather, 2006). The fluidity of their authority and expertise is as yet greater in the conversational space than in their forays into classrooms, creating a zone of proximal development of teaching competence that will help float them through the muddy waters of their upcoming student teaching. This virtual promotion to "teacher" foreshadows the next iterations of their membership in professional community. As Cook-Sather (2006), referencing Victor Turner's

conceptualization of liminality in the construction of cultural competence (1967) notes, email conversations such as these create new kinds of liminal spaces, virtual chrysalises, within which metamorphic identity transformation from teacher candidate to teacher can occur. For example, as Dan, still literally in pre-service, writes about the value of critical pedagogy, his use of the present tense propels him into the immediacy of the role of teacher, "By implementing a critical curriculum we are equipping our learners with a pretty sophisticated set of tools. I feel that it is our responsibility, therefore, to also teach them how and when to use those tools properly."

The affirmations of their growing competence indicates a sense of themselves as educators, as true members of the professional community to which they had apprenticed themselves months before. The tension caused by the disparity they observed between what they knew of critical pedagogy and what they observed of actual pedagogy was gamely tolerated by the candidates and turned to productive use during the communal reflection. Morgan wrote: "It makes me think a lot about how I will run my own classroom, because obviously I want respectful students who listen to one another, but I don't want totally docile obedience." Their deference to the certified teachers in whose classes they were working acquired a sharply critical, yet empathetic edge, as they put their cumulative theoretical and practical learning together, as Dan writes, "I don't want to seem like I'm "bagging on this teacher" as Dr. C put it. This is one isolated incident in the day, and I have no idea what happens in that room when I'm not there."

Social Justice / Critical Consciousness

> Vonick: Hi all, I'm sorry to join the conversation a week after it began, but I've been busy working with my students to put together a school newspaper...one article stands out. ...the third grade teacher was personally affected by the Tsunami and each member of (our school) community donated at least one dollar to the relief effort. Though these 89 kids (K-4) are considered the "impoverished" by Fairfield Country standards they were still willing to give up everything they had for the people in the Tsunami area... Currently, as a community we decided to find on a monthly basis organizations to donate our time or money to. The kids have been eager to share with us different organizations they have learned about. Just this morning, a third grade learner told the school about her weekend of volunteering at a soup kitchen in Stamford. She encouraged the rest of the student body and parents to join her and her mother in a few weeks when they will return to the soup kitchen. The point is that students will rise to many occasions if you teach them what to look for. In the case of the Tsunami story the situation hit close to home and they wanted to help the teacher who they have known and loved for years to assist her country. Once they began to help out on a global level they wanted to assist on a community and local level.
>
> Morgan: Vonick, thanks for the great stories in your own class and school. Children can be so generous and giving, and I agree that it often has nothing to do with socioeconomic class.... What I think critical literacy is all about is drawing from the current happenings in the world and running from there... I think we often fall into the rut of having things be isolated incidents, but if we can all work to connect from topic to topic and idea to idea learning will be more meaningful and come full circle. It is amazing how easily topics can be connected.
>
> Dan: ... I am sure that we ourselves could come up with dozens of instructional topics that would not only provide information and meet curricular standards but

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> would also allow our children to explore the world they live in a critical manner. And I think that's what Vasquez is telling us to do. It's not enough to have a charity drive without deeply investigating the WHYs behind why we are doing it. It's not enough to look at these amazing efforts by our schools and say, "that's great". We need to do that, of course, but we also need to seize these opportunities (however tragic they may be) to guide our children in their exploration of and learning about their world. Wow, what an enormous task. Perhaps we should break it down into smaller, more manageable ones.

As exemplified above in this abridged exchange, the teacher candidates were trying out a match between theory and practice with regard to the concept of social justice, and in the process, developing a sense of themselves as educators for social justice. Although the generosity and charity of donating money and time to help the poor and dispossessed are of themselves insufficiently activist to be accurately described as social justice work, they can inspire people to work together to relieve suffering; teaching kids what to look for can help them see that there are inequities that cause the suffering; this insight can inspire them decide to work together, locally and globally, against oppressive conditions.

Throughout the larger conversation, as we can see from Dan's comment above, the participants note the crucial importance of critical pedagogy in educating for social justice. They long to linger in the critical pedagogical "third space" of student concerns and cares (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997; Vasquez, 2004) because to do so offers opportunity to bring issues of social justice into the curriculum. They have a hunch that solidarity is going to be necessary, given the disappointing evidence of impediments and entrenched resistance they cite from their field experiences. Their affirmations and expressions of solidarity marked a growing commitment to teaching as a site for social justice work, as in Morgan's wistfully written wish (I hope that we can all move into the teaching field together, working together to stay socially active. I think sometimes it just takes a friend or colleague to get others involved...), and were an expression of their hope that they could contribute to positive change in schools and the world through their collective action (Calderwood, 2003; Britzman, 2001; Broido, 2000; Cantor, 2002; DeShon Hamlin, 2004; Givens Generett & Hicks, 2004; Hammerness, 2003; Moll & Arnot-Hopffer, 2005). Note how each positions her or himself as a conscientious agent of change for social justice and as an authentic participant in the larger community of practice as well.

> Amy: In general, I take exception to the authors and writers who make education and literacy in the K-6 classroom a political issue. ... I don't have a problem discussing any issues that are political in nature. My issues are with inferring bias in the classroom-----
>
> Carolyn: Hi Amy, I'm interested in what you're saying but I don't understand. In particular I don't understand what you mean by "inferring bias in the classroom." Do you mean we shouldn't express our political opinions in the classroom? You're probably right but sometimes there is such a thin line separating things like human rights, civil rights, political rights...In the first semester of this class we read "Reading and Writing for Social Action" by Randy and Katherine Bomer. Though we may not be ready to create activists in our classrooms I really took to heart some of the things the Bomers said:
>
> > "Only those who act ever really develop a sense of efficacy, and without a sense of efficacy, how can we teach students that they can make a difference?" (p. 156)

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> I think you're right, Amy, that with kids in K-6 it might be more to the point to address social injustice without its political dressings. However, sometimes it is difficult not to take a "political" stance when addressing social injustice because sometimes social injustice IS a political issue.
>
> Morgan: Amy, I think you make a valid point regarding reining in your own viewpoints in the classroom. In an ideal world it should be a place where all voices can be heard and appreciated. This then makes me wonder what happens when some children express opinions that are not socially just, tolerant, or aware. Do we not have a duty to step in and help them see other points of view? Carolyn, I'm glad that you brought up Bomer and Bomer. Obviously there are so many connections that can be made here. I keep thinking about how we must really take action ourselves and set examples for our students, which I think many teachers are hesitant to do. There is no time or no commitment. But how can we expect out children to embrace socially progressive actions if we are not living it ourselves? I hope that we can all move into the teaching field together, working together to stay socially active. I think sometimes it just takes a friend or colleague to get others involved...

Amy's frustration with the covert and explicit politicization of education clearly caused some uneasiness among the group for a simple reason. Our conversations, oral and electronic, our readings, and the in-school experiences of the teacher candidates were each thickly and explicitly politicized by this point in the semester; many of us had come to terms with the sense of dissonance this produced. In all the courses they had taken so far, including this one, the teacher candidates had spent considerable time examining the relations between ideology and power, and had begun to realize the extent to which their own values, beliefs, ideologies, gender, race, economic class and so on intersect as lines of power with those of the children and families with whom they work. For the teacher candidates, the dissonance, when brought front and center, caused them uneasiness about how to ethically teach. Although as their teacher I had some influence on their growing collective consciousness, the teacher candidates themselves did most of the consciousness raising work during the semester (DeShon Hamlin 2004). In their struggle to work through Amy's challenging entry, the teacher-candidates called again upon theorists and practitioners whom they found inspirational, taking a critically conscious perspective towards teaching and learning in their reflections on fieldwork (Bomer & Bomer; 2001; Vasquez, 2004). They called upon these elders for wisdom and example, reassuring themselves and each other that although the dissonance was exquisitely discomfiting, it was critical to their development as educators. Once again, they positioned themselves within a community of practice, this time as educators for social justice.

Implications For Teacher Education

Citing Cornel West (1997), Givens Generett & Hicks (2004) write that they "want teachers to exhibit audacious hope, the ability to take action when there is little evidence that doing so will produce a positive outcome (p. 192)." In light of our responsibility to model caring and audacious hope, but cognizant of the counter-pressures toward expediency, resignation to the status quo, low expectations and negative raced, classed and gendered beliefs that pummel teacher candidates as they gain experience in schools, our teacher education programs need to stress education and schooling as sites of transformation, hope and social justice, and to emphasize the responsibility of educators to act for justice (Freire, 1998; Guyton, 2000; Nieto, 2000; Oakes & Lipton, 1999; Zollers & Cochran-Smith, 2000). We

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need to, as a thoughtful colleague notes, kindle a fire. We need to imagine ourselves, to talk ourselves into, to experience, a community of educators who put social justice at the heart of our practice. If we do so with conviction, coherence and cohesiveness, and if we listen carefully to our students, we hear the wonderful conversations of audacious hope.

I observed the confidence, knowledge and competence of this group of teacher candidates climb a steep trajectory during the semester of this splendid conversation. They forged friendships and professional alliances that stood through the rigors of their subsequent student teaching and hopefully will continue through their first difficult years as elementary educators. In particular, the co-authors of this paper have gone far in the work of reconciling theory and practice, idealism and practicality, hope and resignation. I harbor an audacious hope that they are going to transform at least some of the manifest and implicit curriculum in their schools. The odds are against their success, I know. But they know how to, as Abiah says, "...call each other out if we notice one of us drifting into a "comfy curriculum" and not challenging ourselves and our students..."

This is value enough to our community of educators. However, there are some implications for teacher education in general that arise from the example of this group.

The first is that teacher education programs that privilege collaboration, reflection, and critical pedagogy, and that connect these processes to the audacious notion that attention to social justice belongs in all the curricula- manifest, implicit and hidden- in our schools, may be well able to kindle a profound sense of professional community among their candidates.

The second is that because disconcerting, disheartening, even alarming, field experiences will intersect with what we ask our teacher-candidates to read and consider, they need a thickly woven, flexible network of support and scaffolding to cushion them as they deconstruct those experiences. When the opportunity to collaboratively reflect is irresistible, as was this e-conversation, the weaving of the scaffolding is shared by many hands, including the hands of relative novices. I suggest that faculty who make use of electronic bulletin boards or course management systems to encourage spontaneous conversation will have success in supporting an on-going conversation.

Third, teacher education programs should anticipate that building community requires a long conversation, one that transcends the parameters of any course or assignment. It was significant that this extended conversation took place outside of the requirements of our course, and that it continues for many of us across time and space. The incubation of this open-ended conversation occurred during the spring of 2005. Continued participation was eventually indirectly coerced as the semester continued because the conversation crept into the face-to-face classroom conversations, and because the teacher-candidates and I enthusiastically commented upon its quality both in class and on-line. It also helped that I acknowledged the value of the conversation in freeing us for other tasks during our class meetings, and, in fact, dropped one of the final course assignments because I felt that the teacher-candidates had outdistanced my expectations for their written reflections through the conversation. Regardless, if such extended conversation is to occur among pre-service teachers and their instructors, it needs explicit endorsement and recognition as an indicator of professional responsibility, whether or not course credit is given for the work. It needs to be recognized and celebrated regularly.

Finally, the conversation shows us that pre-service teachers who see themselves in solidarity with others who strive for social justice see themselves as educators for social justice. This is work that requires connection rather than isolation. It requires knowledge,

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critical consciousness, and a great deal of hope. Arranging experiences, such as disconcerting fieldwork, encouraging engaged pedagogy within the space of student concerns and cares, and providing communal time and space to unravel the puzzles and frustrations of these experiences, offers teacher candidates the opportunity to form solidarity with each other and with more expert theorists and inspiring practitioners within professional community. Pre-service teachers cannot construct our community of practice in isolation. They need to know that they are authentic, competent members of a community of educators. More importantly, they thrive when they are valued for their contributions to our community of practice. Perhaps most important of all, our larger community of practice is in great need of the hope and commitment of educators such as these teacher candidates.

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