Fighting on All Fronts

The Push, Pull, and Persistence of Social Justice Educators and the Move to Reimagine Teacher Preparation

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Abstract

This study investigated the factors that pushed and pulled social justice educators out of urban elementary and secondary (K–12) schools and into teacher education. The authors utilized an autoethnography and counternarrative methodology to examine the systemic and distinct factors that impacted four social justice educators' decisions to leave K–12 schools. Two central categories emerged: neoliberal K–12 push factors and pull factors that lured educators into academia. The

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study also revealed K–12 persistence strategies and describes the way educators reimagine their work in teacher education. It is imperative to learn how educators are maintaining their commitment to social justice on all fronts.

Introduction

I am not leaving the fight, but simply moving to another front. The fight continues on the same. Wherever I am I will be engaged as you are in favor of democratic, popular public schools. (Freire, 1993, p. 140)

In *Pedagogy of the City*, Paulo Freire detailed the tension in choosing to *leave* his position as the municipal secretary of education in São Paulo, Brazil, in order *to stay in the fight*. His words capture the crux of this study, which examines the factors that pushed and pulled the authors, all former social justice teachers in urban elementary and secondary schools,[1] out of our classrooms. Throughout this inquiry, we concluded that we did not leave the field but continued the fight on another front—teacher education, to further our commitment to social justice in K–12 schools. In this article, we analyze (a) the systemic factors that cause social justice educators to leave urban classrooms, (b) persistence strategies that enable social justice teachers to thrive in K–12 schools, and (c) implications for policy and practice in teacher education.

While teacher attrition data often report stayers, movers, and leavers, our story is different and highlights the path of those who did not stay in their classrooms, move schools, or quit (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Each of us left the classroom to pursue graduate study and is now engaged in teacher education as a tenure-track professor in a school of education. The irony of this is not lost on us: We are preparing teacher candidates for a career that we, as successful social justice teachers, left. If we are serious in our commitment to social justice K–12 teaching, it is imperative to examine the factors that lead social justice teachers to leave their classrooms and develop teacher education practices to support and sustain them in staying.

This study emerged from a broader book project examining approaches to teaching social studies for social justice in K–12 classrooms (Agarwal-Rangnath, Dover, & Henning, 2016). As part of that project, authors Dover and Henning solicited letters of advice from veteran social justice teachers to preservice teachers, inviting them to share curricular and pedagogical strategies for navigating school- and district-level mandates (standardized testing, the Common Core State Standards [CCSS], etc.). Over the course of this project, Dover and Henning noticed an unexpected phenomenon: Despite participants' deep commitment to their discipline and students, many were planning their exit from K–12 classrooms. In the 3 years since publication, 40% (9 of 22) of participating teachers left their K–12 classrooms specifically to pursue careers as teacher educators. In this article, Dover and Henning, joined by participants in the initial study, use critical autoethnography and narrative methods to examine what factors led to our collective exits from K–12 schools. How does this inform our current work as teacher educators?

Literature Review

Despite the tremendous human potential, robust diversity, vibrant activism, and community-driven advocacy present in urban centers across the United States, the state of urban schools continues to be heavily constrained by gross inequity, resource disparities, restrictive top-down mandates, and low expectations (Milner & Lomotey, 2014). It is important to note that the educational disparities that impact urban underresourced schools, specifically those serving communities of Color, are not new phenomena but endemic to U.S. schooling (Spring, 2013). Ladson-Billings (2006) framed these historical disparities as an *education debt* that has accumulated over decades of inequitable social and economic policies. Contemporary neoliberal reforms both emerged from and perpetuate this legacy of disparity, with urban schools disproportionately susceptible to these damaging policies (Anyon, 1997; A. W. Johnson, 2012; Lipman, 2011). Broadly, neoliberal policy functions to transfer control from public to private sectors (Hursh, 2007); in education, it emphasizes scripted, standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing (Ede, 2006; Milner, 2013; Picower, 2011), school closure, reconstitution, restructuring, a rise in charter schools (A. W. Johnson, 2012; Peck & Reitzug, 2014), and the eradication of labor unions (Lipman, 2008; Lipman & Hursh, 2007). Thus urban educators not only teach in schools that are impacted by educational disparity but are also forced to strategically navigate an increasingly complex array of policies designed to disrupt, destabilize, and confine teaching and learning in urban classrooms (Hollins, 2012; Howard & Milner, 2014; S. M. Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; Williamson, Apedoe, & Thomas, 2016).

Research underscores the many challenges that face social justice teachers, including individual and institutional opposition, insufficient curricular resources, inadequate training, and decreasing autonomy (Agarwal, 2011; Agarwal, Epstein, Oppenheim, Oyler, & Sonu, 2011; Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Dover, 2013; Dover, Henning, & Agarwal-Rangnath, 2016; Gorski, 2010; Picower, 2011). These factors can complicate a teacher's effort to translate their vision of social justice and student-directed teaching and learning into classroom practice (Dover, 2013; Henning, 2013; Schultz, McSurley, & Salguero, 2013). Despite these complications, there are countless examples of social justice teachers artfully navigating these challenges (e.g., Agarwal et al., 2011; Dover, 2016; Picower, 2012b). Social justice teaching in urban schools merges academic skills, content knowledge, and critical literacy (Camangian, 2010, 2015; Epstein, Mayorga, & Nelson, 2011; Martin & Larnell, 2014); infuses culturally caring classroom practices (Gay, 2000, 2014; Howard, 2002; Ware, 2006); sustains the linguistic, cultural, and dynamic practices of students of Color and other marginalized groups (Brockenbrough, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2017); and involves social action beyond the schoolhouse (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Picower & Boyle, 2017).

We see tremendous value in highlighting and learning from the ways social justice teachers strategically navigate hostile curricular, pedagogical, and policy

contexts. However, we also recognize that this work comes at a price: A growing body of research (Picower, 2011; Santoro, 2011) has suggested that teachers are leaving the classroom at unprecedented rates, especially in urban districts. A recent report by the Learning Policy Institute reported an average 8% annual teacher attrition rate, with 25% of teachers who left citing dissatisfaction with testing and accountability pressures (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Research has highlighted that justice-oriented teachers are teaching in a state of fear (Picower, 2011) and enduring demoralization (Santoro, 2011) caused by larger systemic problems and school site pressures (Craig, 2014); moreover, teachers of Color experience racial battle fatigue when confronting racism in schools (Pizarro & Kohli, 2018).

Many teachers seek not to leave their students per se but rather the structures that systematically disrupt, undermine, and regulate teaching and learning in urban communities (Dunn, 2014); these include common features of neoliberal policy, such as low levels of autonomy, hyperstandardization, and administrative leadership (Craig, 2014; Dunn, 2014). Scholars have also identified pull factors that lure teachers out of the classroom, such as a desire to be change agents beyond the classroom in order to have a larger impact on the field (Olsen & Anderson, 2017) and lucrative pay (Rinke & Mawhinney, 2017; Smith & Ulvik, 2017). In this article, we examine the *push factors* that led us, as social justice teachers, to leave K–12 classrooms and the *pull factors* that drew us into teacher education; we also explore what we call *persistence factors*, or factors that enable social justice educators to thrive within and despite hostile school climates.

Conceptual Framework

In approaching this study, we drew from Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientization*. According to Freire (1970, 2003, 2005), conscientization is an ongoing activity of engaging in critical consciousness that involves reflection and action upon the world; it can help individuals "achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 452). However, Freire (2005) cautioned that conscientization does not occur magically, haphazardly, or as the result of opportune economic or historical events. Nor is it an individual process but a collective undertaking; more specifically, it is a "joint project in that it takes place in a [person] among other [people], [people] united by their action and by their reflection upon that action and upon the world" (Freire, 1970, p. 471).

Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) built upon Freire's model of conscientization processes (Solórzano, personal communication, 2014) to conceptualize the ways that an individual internally and externally engages in a social justice process, which they term as *transformational resistance*. When engaged in transformational resistance, individuals bring both a structural critique of social change and a commitment to social justice that provides the distinct opportunity for social change.

Our study examined the way we individually, and, at times, collectively, persisted to engage in social justice in K–12 schools, on all fronts.

Methods

Research Process

As detailed earlier, this study emerged from Agarwal-Rangnath et al.'s (2016) research and our collective desire to understand the factors that lead social justice teachers to leave their classrooms and become teacher educators. In keeping with our commitment to scholarship that embodies principles of conscientization and transformational resistance, we channeled Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (2009) original ideas of *inquiry as stance* and *critical autoethnography* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) as strategies to deepen our understandings around "the ways we stand, the ways we see, and the lenses we see through" (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 8) now as teacher educators.

We began by reaching out to participants in the initial study and inviting them to join us in this research; ultimately, six of us collectively designed and participated in this study (of whom five are authors of this article). Next, we drafted a set of inquiry questions, including the following: As a social justice educator, what factors led to your exit from urban K–12 classrooms? What pushed or pulled you out? What factors made it possible for you to teach for social justice for as long as you did? What drew you to teacher education? How do you sustain yourself, now, as a social justice educator? and How do you prepare your own candidates to stay in the field?

Each of the six collaborators wrote an autoethnographic narrative that responded to these questions and detailed other personally relevant aspects of his or her decision to move from K–12 classrooms into teacher education. This process enabled us to examine our intimate interactions within our school sites (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983); to draw from our experiences as "insiders" (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999); and to consider how our personal trajectories impact the decisions we make regarding pedagogy, course materials, and teacher education practice. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, we centered our interpretation of interactions (Chang, 2008), both in the moment and in retrospect. In so doing, we seek to challenge the dominant neoliberal narrative around urban education by employing counternarratives of social justice educators (Picower & Kohli, 2017). We make no claim of objectivity and fully embrace the subjectivity of our interpretations of the process and visibility within the study (Butler, 2009; Chang, 2008; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

Data Analysis

We used an inductive approach in analyzing autoethnographic narratives. The narratives captured our desire to become social justice teachers, experience in urban K–12 classrooms, factors that led to leaving, and current work in teacher

education. Navarro and Shah read all of the data and then identified themes and categories to develop an initial codebook to analyze the findings. Two central categories emerged: (a) factors that *pushed* us out of the K–12 classroom and (b) other contextual factors that *pulled* us into academia. We also identified another prominent category that required more data: factors that kept us in the classroom. As a result, we engaged in an additional round of narrative writing. In total, 50 pages of narrative writing were analyzed. After we coded all the narratives, two more themes became distinguishable, *persistence strategies in K–12* and the desire to *reimagine teacher education* as another front for social justice.

Using analytic memos (Charmaz, 2006), we identified the relationship among the categories, then grouped the data according to themes. For example, when Xavier was told to remove culturally relevant curriculum and focus more on the standards, we coded that as a push factor, specifically, restrictive curriculum. Lastly, to ensure the accuracy of each of our voices and experience, we then conducted member checks that allowed each person to clarify interpretations of the findings.

Participants

In this article, we focus our analysis specifically on the unique experiences of social justice teachers who taught for 5 or more years in urban K–12 schools and then left to become teacher educators. Four of the six original collaborators met these criteria; see Table 1 for details about participants and their respective school

Table 1
Teacher and School Demographics

Teacher[a]	Race/ ethnicity	Gender	Type of urban school[b]	Location	Experience (years)	School demographics
Ellen	White	Woman	Urban emergent and urban characteristic public high schools	Eastern United States	5	White, Black, and Latinx[c] working-class students
Xavier	Latinx	Man	Urban intensive public high schools	Western United States	5	Black and Latinx working-class students
Gina	Latinx	Woman	Urban intensive public elementary schools	Western United States	7	Black and Latinx working-class students
Jacob	White	Man	Urban intensive public middle and high schools	Western United States	16	Latinx working-class students

[a]All names are pseudonyms. [b]Type of school drawn from Milner's (2012) typology of urban schools. [c]Latinx is a gender-neutral term to describe individuals who descend from Latin America (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016).

contexts. In the pages that follow, we examine the push, pull, and persistence factors that shaped each participant's trajectory as a social justice educator.

The schools where Ellen taught were notable for the repeated disruptions associated with changes in leadership and state mandates, with one of the districts now taken over by the state. Jacob witnessed firsthand the rollout of the policy behind the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and how it rearranged the priorities of public education and the organization of his school site. Similar to Jacob, the schools where Xavier taught had been impacted by school restructuring reform that drastically impacted the learning environment and created teacher turnover. Gina's administrator was new to the position and school and had never taught at the elementary level or in a Black and Latinx community. Prior to her arrival, her administrator had "pushed out" veteran teachers, and she was one of a handful of teachers at the school with tenure.

Findings

Push Factors

The data describe how neoliberal reform interrupted our daily teaching practices, undermined efforts to teach for social justice, and ultimately pushed us out of the classroom. Neoliberal reform included constant school restructuring and mass teacher layoffs, challenging professional development demands, restrictive curriculum, and enduring harassment by administration.

School restructuring and mass teacher layoffs. Jacob and Xavier taught at two of the largest high schools in the nation, both of which were identified as program improvement schools.[2] As a result, their schools were vulnerable to structural educational reform. Jacob explains how neoliberalism impacted his school context:

> [My school] experienced every large-scale school reform that rolled through the district, shifting a large school to several small schools, redesigning the campus, etc. None of the reforms were ever allowed to come to fruition and it led to a whole school collective reform hangover and exhaustion. It shifted our thinking away from teaching and learning and pushed teachers to become angry which shifted us away from the critical conversations we needed to have. Though I didn't have this language for most of my career, the majority of these reforms were neoliberal and managerial.

The constant restructuring of Jacob's school damaged the educational environment, relationships, and morale of teachers and staff. According to Jacob, the reform efforts did not improve teaching or learning for the campus. Instead, the faculty, staff, and students expended their time, energy, and focus on restructuring their school, which impacted campus morale. Similarly, Xavier's narrative describes how his school had undergone unpredictable and at times erratic restructuring, during which he received a reduction-in-force (pink slip) notice:

> My teaching was repetitively impacted by accountability efforts that were constantly restructuring my school. For example, the school created a freshman academy, next it shifted to a small learning community (SLC) model, and then the school did away with the SLCs when it was reconstituted.[3] At the same time, I received a reduction-in-force notice, which led to me to take a position at a corporate charter high school.

Xavier explains how school restructuring kept his school in a constant state of flux. The school went through various phases that ultimately led to each reform being abandoned. School reconstitution not only dismantled the school structure but also removed half of the faculty from the campus. At this same time, the school lost more of its staff due to teacher layoffs that began in 2009.[4] Two of us spoke of how the layoffs forced us to relocate schools. At another school, Jacob describes how the teacher layoffs impacted his decision to stay in the classroom:

> In the cuts and pink slipping throughout 2008–2010, we lost all that we had gained in human capital. The new teachers we had worked with were gone, either at other schools, districts or professions. I had begun to move towards self-protection. Rather than being an elected member of the school leadership as I had been for years, I took a less active stance. . . . I had always been students- and teaching-first teacher, but as the reforms ensued, I wasn't quite sure how many times I could go full out and get my heart broken. I was afraid I was getting close to that number when I made the decision to leave the classroom.

Both narratives described the way that school restructuring shook the learning environment and created instability, in the name of reform. Jacob and Xavier's schools were in a constant state of flux, where reform would quickly be implemented; then a reorganization of the school structure, personnel, and students would occur; and later the reform efforts would be abandoned. At the same time, each campus had a mass exodus of teachers due to school reconstitution and teacher layoffs. The combination of federal-, state-, and school-level policies and the economic crisis resulted in a push factor for these educators. In the following section, we examine how curricular reform and school leadership further challenge our efforts to teach for social justice.

Impact on social justice teaching. Neoliberal curricular reform not only impacted the school contexts but also seeped into classrooms and interrupted efforts to teach for social justice. Specifically, we endured regulation through "professional development," restrictive curricular mandates, and policing or harassment by administrators.

Professional development. Gina was required to attend 2 hours per week of professional development (PD) at her school site. The implementation of the new CCSS dominated her PD time and encroached upon her instructional autonomy and classroom practice. Gina said, "Our professional development . . . shifted to focus solely on Common Core test preparation, with text-dependent questions and written responses to literature taking up each meeting, including the second hour,

which was supposed to be designed by teachers." The administration prioritized implementation and assessment of the CCSS, which resulted in increased emphasis on testing and standardization schoolwide; this eventually dominated all scheduled PD and had teachers meet more than the required 2 hours per week.

Gina further explained that administration utilized PD time for teachers to monitor and assess their peers' classroom:

> Our professional development would conclude with groups of teachers walking around with checklists "grading" other teachers' classroom environment. This checklist didn't assess the quality of the environment but more so the arbitrary requests made by the administrator. Teachers were not being held accountable for the rigor on each board but rather that it keep up appearances should district officials arrive, and we were being asked to snitch on each other.

Gina describes the way her school's requirement that teachers surveil one another created and maintained a culture of compliance and accountability. The PD meetings not only pushed neoliberal themes of standardization and testing but also had teachers "snitch on each other" as a form of teacher accountability. Picower (2011) described how this practice of teachers "snitching on each other" to their administrators contributes to the notion of "teaching in a state of fear" (p. 56). The preceding example describes the way a school site reproduced the themes of standardization, assessment, and accountability through PD.

Restrictive curriculum. Xavier taught at a school that was managed by a corporate charter consortium that encouraged faculty to standardize their curriculum. He recalls a conversation with a new administrator:

> I was held to rigid interpretations of content standards that were aligned with high-stakes tests. After an observation, I was told by my assistant principal to remove culturally relevant curriculum from my lesson plans and focus on the standards. At the time, I was utilizing the poetry of Tupac Shakur as an entry point to the philosophers of the Enlightenment era. Nevertheless, I maintained my commitment to social justice teaching yet had to endure harassment by school administration.

Xavier's comment further describes the way that some of us had to navigate a hostile teaching climate. His assistant principal was unwilling to discuss the possibility of integrating cultural relevance into the curriculum. As a result, Xavier had to be covert in his teaching. Xavier's curriculum restrictions ended up being one of the driving forces that pushed him out of the classroom.

Ellen taught English in an urban high school that also attempted to restrict her social justice approach. The following narrative describes a conversation with her principal to discuss a curricular modification she made for a student:

> Another teacher went to the principal about my curriculum, and I got called down to the office to justify why I was teaching about Rosa Parks in my British Literature class. The lesson had emerged out of a conversation regarding historical and

contemporary approaches to civil disobedience, a theme in one of the essays in our required textbook. I went with a copy of my full unit, the research paper assignment and evaluation criteria, the passage in the textbook, my student's IEP (I made the Rosa Parks link to help a specific student contextualize abstract ideas), and a full analysis of what standards were addressed by the unit. My principal approved my request but warned me not to "push the tolerance stuff too far."

Ellen's example shows how she was forced to defend a pedagogical and curricular approach that another teacher found "nontraditional." While Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott is widely taught in U.S. schools, Ellen's professional expertise was questioned, and she was required to provide additional documentation above and beyond the lesson plans all teachers submitted weekly. Moreover, the administrator warned her that her social justice approach has limits. The following section further discusses how administrators not only hindered social justice teaching but also created a hostile climate.

School leadership and harassment. Several of us found that school leadership and administrators impacted our decisions to leave the classroom. For instance, Xavier said the following:

During my fifth year of teaching, I had received quite a bit of harassment from the assistant principal and lost faith in my principal's ability to lead a "social justice-themed school." After a number of classroom observations, I was written up because my teaching was "too political." It soon became evident that the new assistant principal purpose was to "clean up shop." Within a short time, our principal departed from the campus without explanation. Teachers requested to be transferred, changed districts, and some, like myself, resigned.

The preceding example illuminates ways that school administration or an administrator can be a driving force to push out social justice educators. It is important to note that Xavier indicated that the teachers and the principal were pushed out. The principal had a vision for the school to have a social justice focus and purposely hired social justice educators. However, the social justice focus was not shared with the charter corporation administration, and as a result, the principal lost autonomy, had difficulty leading the school, and was replaced. For Xavier, the combination of pink slips, curriculum restrictions, unstable leadership, and harassment led him to leave the classroom.

In another example, Gina explains how an administrator abused his power and pushed her and her colleagues to leave:

It didn't matter how much I did for my students, he was never satisfied and never appreciated what I did. He ran the school as though we were not a public school with a union and attempted to force us to meet in grade levels on our own time without compensation, and would then publicly shame the grade levels that were unable to do so. . . . It was my experiences and dehumanization with this administrator that pushed me to leave the elementary classroom altogether.

Gina's experience demonstrates the way an administrator abused his power to intimidate and control teachers, resulting in many teachers leaving the school. The teachers at the school were unappreciated, harassed, shamed, and removed from the campus. In summary, the push factors served as main catalysts for our departures, yet impacted each of us differently. It is important to note that as we examined the data, another, yet less prominent theme emerged: *pull factors*.

Pull Factors

Pull factors were contextual variables that lured us into academia, including the desire to have a broader impact on education and to legitimize our voices as educators. These factors reflect the low status of public K–12 teachers throughout the United States.

Frustrated with the ways their voices were stifled in K–12 schools, we hoped they could affect change on a larger scale by reaching a wider audience through teacher education and scholarship. Though she was committed to her students, Ellen realized that she could have a broader impact through research and publishing around issues of social justice. Ellen saw "educators as change agents" and created her research agenda in higher education around "social justice teacher inquiry." Her hope was to support educators as "co-creators of curriculum and policy":

> I was fascinated by the research process and shocked that there were so few people publishing about approaches to teaching for social justice education in standards-driven classrooms. It seemed like so few scholars were writing about the ways social justice educators were navigating the on-the-ground realities of neoliberal education policy (which I didn't yet know to call neoliberal education policy), and I knew that this was work I was meant to do.

Teachers' voices are often devalued in education (Hargreaves, 1996; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011), and attaining a terminal degree, such as a PhD or EdD, can elevate a teacher's influence in the field. Jacob experienced this firsthand. While still a teacher, Jacob had developed curricular materials and delivered PD to educators but faced roadblocks when he wanted to take the next step in making his curriculum more public. He believed that changing his title might have improved his chances:

> As I worked to get my curriculum published or to write and publish I kept running into the "only a teacher" syndrome. I got the distinct impression that my writing would more easily be published with the "alphabet soup" of additional letters [PhD] after my name.

He hoped that by entering higher education, he could affect more change by "advocating for what I had struggled for all those years." Several of us also believed that a platform in higher education could positively affect education reform and K–12 teaching.

Persistence Strategies

While we faced pressures that pushed and pulled us out of classrooms, for years, we also found ways to *persist.* Persistence strategies enabled us to navigate, resist, and maintain our commitment to social justice teaching in urban K–12 schools. Persistence included survival strategies and critical communities to support our social justice teaching. This theme was imperative to include in order to provide a critical hope for social justice educators who continue to persist in the neoliberal context.

Strategic survival. As previously mentioned in the "Restrictive Curriculum" section, we faced various obstacles, such as standardization, restrictive administrative oversight, or directives not to teach for social justice. However, we found creative, and at times covert, ways of aligning the curriculum to state standards (see Agarwal-Rangnath et al., 2016; Dover et al., 2016, for additional analysis of their and their fellow teachers' strategic navigation of restrictive curricular mandates).

Early in her teaching career, Gina learned a valuable lesson about social justice teaching and activism. The 2006 May Day protest known as a Day Without Immigrants was one of the largest recorded demonstrations in Los Angeles. The event called for immigrants to boycott work, school, and economic activities. The following year, Gina taught a social studies lesson that discussed the origins of International Workers (May) Day. Unbeknownst to her, that lesson would result in her job being threatened:

> I never told my students to skip school, I was careful with my wording, but this was the year after the massive marches in LA and several students told their parents they wanted to go to the May Day marches. My [White] principal heard about this, got upset and was threatening to dismiss me. My assistant principal, a Chicana from Echo Park, lovingly pulled me aside and told me to shut my mouth until I got tenure, and then I could teach how I saw fit. She supported my work and wanted me to remain in the profession. I said okay and shut my mouth. It wasn't that I stopped doing critical work, but I learned to be more clandestine.

As Gina mentions, social justice teaching in the classroom can lead to civic action, even if it is unintended. With the looming fear of being dismissed, she received some critical advice from her assistant principal that sustained her for an additional 7 years in the classroom.

In another example, Ellen explained that "there were so many rules in the high school, and I really enjoyed the challenge of working within (and subverting when necessary) the 'system.'" She stated that the process involved a "creative dance" to "connect with students, entice them into engaging with canonized literature, and build a curriculum that reflected my students' own interests and priorities." Ellen provides an example of how she engaged in all three goals:

> I was required to teach canonized texts that didn't necessarily align with the interests or values of my students. I created units that used the texts as jumping-off points

for more comprehensive analysis of sociocultural phenomenon. Rather than using Dickens's *Great Expectations* to center an exploration 19th-century England, I grounded my *Great Expectations* unit in the analysis of socioeconomic systems of education, barriers faced by first-generation or underrepresented students, and overarching constructs of privilege and oppression. We still did all of the literary analysis—examining setting, plot, theme, characterization, etc.—but did it in service to our investigation of broader questions.

Ellen's example displays the way she provided students with a unit of study that centered the experience of historically marginalized students through a literary analysis of a canonized text. It is important to note that Ellen and some of us had at times to defend our curriculum (see "Restrictive Curriculum"). Similar to much of the literature on navigating the curriculum (Dover, 2016; Picower, 2011; Stillman, 2009), we had to find creative ways to work within or subvert the curriculum, and that was often dictated by the teaching context.

Critical communities. We each participated in formal and informal social justice organizations, which we identify as critical communities that were developed at school sites and outside of school walls as we engaged in affinity, curriculum, teacher activist, and scholarly groups to sustain our social justice teaching. Through these critical communities, we designed curriculum, engaged in social action, and received socioemotional support.

Within a school site. Each of us reported that teacher isolation was an obstacle in teaching for social justice. We then collaborated with social justice–oriented teachers, teacher activist networks, and curriculum-based organizations; some found colleagues at their school sites who were also committed to social justice. For example, Ellen explains how she worked with colleagues at her school site. "My school wasn't necessarily social justice oriented, but there were a cadre of amazing teachers who shared my passion for equity and justice, and we had gotten pretty good at working the system." Many of us explained that we countered "teacher isolation" by developing a committed community of social justice educators.

At some school sites, we developed curriculum networks with like-minded colleagues. For example, Xavier explains that he had started lesson planning with someone who was teaching the same subject:

> The more that I spoke with him, the more that I realized that we had similar peda-gogical beliefs and broader social justice goals. We would have planning retreats at each other's apartment and we also met up after work to lesson plan, bounce off curricular ideas, troubleshoot student issues, and process what worked and didn't. We ended up backwards planning for the remainder of the year. After our first year, we started to include a couple of like-minded colleagues into our planning circle. We had a small yet committed contingency of social justice educators in our history department who periodically planned together.

This relationship provided the opportunity to reflect, plan, and rejuvenate from the

strain accumulated in teaching for social justice. It is important to note that coplanning in his first year also made it part of his teaching practice, and in future years, he expanded this approach to working with teachers across the city (see the next section).

Beyond the school walls. All of us also branched outside of our schools to find a sociopolitical community to enhance our ability to engage in social action. Ellen explained that "having relationships with other social justice teachers, activists, and community members who could support me, push me, [helped] me find ways to navigate often unjust or oppressive school systems fluidly." She met with fellow White educators to have critical conversations on Whiteness, pedagogy, and interactions with students to push her practice in a racially and ethnically diverse urban school:

> A few other White social justice-oriented teachers and I formed an informal discussion group—White Educators for Social Justice—to talk about the ways our Whiteness and White privilege manifested in the classroom. We brought up critical incidents from our classroom—everything from lessons that went well (or didn't) to our interactions with parents or administrators to our own learning edges regarding our students and communities. It was really helpful to have a group of other teachers who I trusted enough to bring my own learning, and also to hold me accountable when I felt overwhelmed or frustrated, or was simply blinded by my own narrow worldview.

Ellen's comments explain that an affinity group that centered her Whiteness and commitment to social justice provided critical support for her development. It was vital for her to have a community where she could be vulnerable to have an honest conversation about her practice.

Gina and Xavier were active in the People's Education Movement, an anti-colonial teacher activist organization that centers People of Color, and were also involved in the organization's teacher inquiry group (TIG; see Martinez, Valdez, & Cariaga, 2016; Navarro, 2018). Xavier explained that "as a member of a teacher activist organization, I worked alongside like-minded educators that collectively sought to address larger structural issues while improving their teaching practice." Gina further stated,

> The People's Education Movement helped sustain my critical teaching practice. The collective not only nourished my spirit, which was often beat down by my administrator and dehumanizing testing practices, but shared critical practices that I could then implement in my classroom.

As mentioned in the push section, Gina endured harassment and intimidation from her administrator, yet being involved in teacher activist networks gave her the socioemotional and curricular support she needed to stay in the classroom as long as she did. Xavier echoed this sentiment and noted that being part of a TIG was especially valuable for community organizing and also lesson planning with social justice educators:

> We often shared curricular resources, units/lesson plans, and moral support with one another. As a member of the activist organization and the TIG, it was encouraging to see folks who were teaching for social justice at different school sites and navigating through similar obstacles. Even more so, it was invigorating to work collaboratively with folks on broader social justice projects, something that was bigger than our classroom. Participating in these spaces helped me keep going!

For Gina and Xavier, the People's Education Movement provided a space to be affirmed and engage in collective change. Similar to what their peers had experienced, out-of-school spaces offered a community to keep them in the classroom and engage in a collective praxis of critical reflection, discussion, and action that impacted their classrooms and beyond.

The New Front: Reimagining Teacher Education

Our analysis revealed that although we all left our K–12 classrooms, we did not relinquish our commitment to social justice. Specifically, our narratives highlighted the following strategies as critical elements of our current work as social justice teacher educators: (a) centering the narratives of social justice teachers, (b) preparing candidates to strategically use standards, (c) building and participating in critical communities, and (d) modeling critical engagement with restrictive district and university mandates.

We each described ways that our own experience as a social justice teacher shapes our approach to teacher education and specifically the choices we make concerning our pedagogy, course materials, and transparency. In this way, the flow of social justice teachers into teacher education spaces represents an opportunity to reimagine teacher education as authentically grounded in critical K–12 practice. Gina, for example, is "very honest with my teacher candidates about the difficulties they will encounter in the field. Whether it is scripted curriculum, administration, or testing, I keep it real with them and attempt to share survival strategies." She shares the wisdom that she gained as an elementary teacher: "I advise them to be mindful of getting tenure in order to stay in the game for the long run, and this may require they be clandestine with their social justice work."

Our experiences as teachers led us to center candidates' engagement with standards and district policies. Ellen and Gina prepare their teacher candidates to teach social justice elements though the CCSS (see, e.g., Dover, 2016; Picower, 2012a) so that it cannot be argued that they are straying from the required standards; they also warn candidates to be well versed in federal, state, and district policy so they are prepared to justify why they are teaching their curriculum. Additionally, all of us explicitly prepare candidates to build their own critical communities in the field by reading about various models across the nation (Dover, 2016; Navarro, 2018; Picower, 2012b), codeveloping curriculum in TIGs, and participating in the process of developing their own social justice teacher organizations.

We model critical engagement with policy mandates with and for our students. Ellen states that "my hope is that if I can support pre- and in-service teachers in seeing themselves as co-creators of curriculum and policy, they'll be able to thrive in a career that is increasingly hostile towards teachers and students alike." More specifically, her teaching has students contemplate how they will sustain themselves, regardless of their teaching context:

> I have built projects into my classes that require pre- and in-service teachers to prepare to or enact professional agency regarding questions of curriculum and policy. Undergraduates in my classes about multicultural education create discipline-specific "social justice curriculum guides" and write research-based "administrator rationales" to prepare them to advocate for their work. Teachers in my graduate-level courses on curriculum theory do a comprehensive analysis of curricular politics, processes, and products at their own schools, and then propose reforms designed to address contextually-relevant concerns.

We also model critical engagement by challenging supremacist policies and by constructively critiquing mandates in our own scholarship (e.g., Dover, 2018; Henning, Dover, Dotson, & Agarwal-Rangnath, 2018).

Despite the dehumanizing push factors we endured in urban schools, we persisted collectively and remained committed to social justice education even if pulled into a new front of the fight. It is also important to note that the findings show that social justice teaching and schools *are feasible* within a neoliberal climate but that this work—like all teaching and learning in urban classrooms—is increasingly restricted and confined.

Discussion

Our research echoes the findings of prior studies that describe social justice educators pushed out by neoliberal mandates and pressures (Craig, 2014; Dunn, 2014) as well as pulled out of the K–12 classroom due to their desire to have a broader impact on the field (Olsen & Anderson, 2017). In addition, our research begins a deeper conversation regarding persistence strategies and reconstructive methods in teacher preparation. It is imperative to focus on these areas collectively to combat an age of neoliberal policies and conditions in the field.

Social justice teachers cannot wait for institutional support (Nieto, 2005); instead, they must build their own networks of sustainability. Instead of falling into the trap of teacher isolation, social justice teachers must strategically use content standards to cocreate critical curriculum within a collective (Martinez, 2017; Navarro, 2018). There is a need to further examine the way that out-of-school teacher-led spaces, such as racial affinity groups, teacher inquiry groups, and activist organizations, are taking on the labor of sustaining social justice educators.

Future research should also investigate how public school administrators create and support spaces for social justice teaching in their schools. We found that

school leadership played a pivotal role in the professional trajectories of social justice educators. The reprimands, harassment, and shame impacted educators' ability to stay in the classroom; having an administration and school structure that supports social justice educators so they feel protected makes a world of difference. Just as teachers must be prepared to navigate neoliberal conditions to sustain their teaching practice and survive the profession long term, administrators must also be prepared to navigate these two opposing worlds.

This study is in conversation with recent scholarship that uplifts teacher educators' counternarratives (Picower & Kohli, 2017) to transform the systemic and everyday practices of White supremacy, social inequities, and the privatization found in teacher education. Ultimately, however, neoliberal schools will never provide the support that critical educators need to be liberatory teachers. Thus teacher education programs must prepare teachers to develop the supports they need themselves. By engaging current and former social justice teachers as collaborative partners and faculty members, teacher education programs have the opportunity to learn from the authentic experiences—and persistence strategies—of those most directly impacted by neoliberal reform. Researchers must continue to examine what helps social justice teachers stay in the field, especially in light of sometimes overwhelming push and pull factors.

Conclusion and Implications

We wish we could argue that schools are more affirming now than they were when we left. Unfortunately, this is not the case: Neoliberal mandates continue to expand, and the political climate is more hostile every day. It is impossible to overstate the impact of this climate on teachers and students: In the weeks following the 2016 presidential election, nearly 900 incidents of bigotry and harassment were reported across the nation, with 183 of those taking place at a K–12 school (Miller & Werner-Winslow, 2016). The day after the election, middle schoolers in Detroit chanted "Build the Wall" at lunch, which was captured on video and shared widely across social media platforms (Dickson & Williams, 2016). Multiple studies have documented the impact of the 2016 presidential election, and its subsequent political discord, on teachers and students (e.g., Rogers et al., 2017; Sondell, Baggett, & Dunn, 2018), with implications for social-emotional health, academic outcomes, and overall climate. In one study, 72% of teachers surveyed asked for PD on how to teach in turbulent times (Rogers et al., 2017); related research underscored the need to prepare and protect teachers navigating political trauma, combating bigotry, and addressing the impact of fake news (Peters, 2017; Sondell et al., 2018).

As former teachers and current teacher educators, we see a need for policies, practices, and scholarship that respond to the realities of contemporary K–12 classrooms, not theoretical or idealized contexts. Our own students will encounter the same push and pull factors that led us out of the classroom, and many will face

hostilities we could not have imagined. If we want social justice teachers to stay in K–12 schools, we must both prepare teachers to persist and also work with them to alter the conditions that lead teachers to leave.

We see significant possibilities in scholarship, including scholarship that (like this study) draws upon the experiences and expertise of social justice teachers. In addition to analyses like these, which can be used to help future teachers prepare to successfully navigate hostile conditions, we also call for collaborative teacher action research. Such research can nourish community among social justice teachers, elevate teachers' voices, and enable teachers to have a broader impact without pulling them from their classrooms.

We also see a need to equip future social justice teachers with strategies that we were not provided in our own preparation, including training regarding community organizing, resistance, and self-care. In our own classrooms, we support candidates' development of social justice networks and leadership skills through engagement in local, regional, national, and virtual networks and conferences; active modeling of TIGs; and analysis of research regarding teacher attrition (e.g., Dunn, Farver, Guenther, & Wexler, 2017). Such experiences were missing from our own teacher education, and we wonder whether this preparation would have increased our longevity as K–12 teachers.

Our own trajectories as social justice teachers and teacher educators underscore the importance of critical communities in learning to survive and thrive in the classroom. Our own critical communities comprise not only face-to-face collaborations with colleagues but also the intentional repurposing of scholarly spaces as sites of shared inquiry and professional learning (e.g., Dover, Henning, Agarwal-Rangnath, & Dotson, 2018; Picower & Kohli, 2017). It is with this vision in mind that we invite readers to use the narratives in this article as an opportunity to engage pre- and in-service teachers, and teacher educators, in critical inquiry regarding what it means to thrive as social justice educators. Collectively, we have the opportunity, and responsibility, to reimagine our field as we prepare our candidates—and ourselves—to keep up the fight.

Notes

[1] For the remainder of the article, urban public elementary and secondary schools are referred to as *urban schools*.

[2] Under NCLB, elementary and secondary schools that exceed 5 years of program improvement status are required to undergo school restructuring efforts.

[3] School reconstitution is a NCLB accountability measure that restructures a school by replacing all or most school staff (Stecher, Vernez, & Steinberg, 2010).

[4] Following the 2008 economic crisis, mass layoff notices were sent to public school teachers throughout the nation (see Associated Press, 2010).

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