

Reproducing or Challenging Power in the Questions We Ask and the Methods We Use: A Framework for Activist Research in Urban Education

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Many have argued that educational research does little to change (and may actually reproduce) the social-structural inequalities shaping the quality of high-poverty urban schools. Building from this premise, this paper asks: How can university-based scholars of urban education do research that encourages, produces, or informs change in urban schools and the conditions that shape them? I examine two broad aspects of urban educational research: the questions we ask and the methods we use. In both cases, I critique the dominant paradigm of technical rationality—one in which school failure is approached as a localized technical problem unveiled through neutral, objective, and experimental research methods. In contrast, I propose a paradigm of “political rationality” (Klees, Rizzini, & Dewees, 2000, *Children on the streets of the Americas: homelessness, education and globalization in the United States, Brazil and Cuba*. New York: Routledge) that approaches school failure and research practice as political issues situated within and shaped by social relations of power. Innovations in urban education research that reflect the logic of political rationality include: more contextualized and politicized analyses of urban schools, and the expanded use of engaged, collaborative, and participatory research methods. Drawing on this work and my experience implementing a participatory research project, I propose a framework for activist research in urban education, and critically evaluate the limits and possibilities of such work to effect change in urban schools.

KEY WORDS: research paradigms; equity/social change; collaborative/participatory research.

This paper engages in dialogue with urban education researchers who want to do more than observe, describe, analyze, and explain the dynamics of urban school failure and educational inequality. I write in conversation

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with those who, like me, want their research to intervene—to expose and also disrupt the patterns of inequality and the oppressive, marginalizing practices that define the school experience for far too many poor, urban youth. I begin from the assumption that most urban education researchers aim to do work that encourages, produces, and informs change in educational policy, practice, and the conditions that shape them. Further, I assert an orientation toward social change to bring about equity, access, and fairness is at the heart of the construct we call “urban education research”—a euphemism for research in high-poverty, segregated, and largely low-achieving public schools. A quick look at the organizing questions driving research in urban education reveals this orientation toward change; for example: How do we talk about and explain the achievement gap, or the vast resource inequality across different kinds of schools? What are the consequences of these gaps and inequalities for youth, communities, and society as a whole? How could educational opportunity, access, and achievement be equalized and improved for all students?

Despite this central concern with equity, many have argued that educational research does little to change—and may actually reproduce—the fundamental relations of inequality shaping the lives of urban youth and the quality of their schools (Anyon, 1997, 2005; Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1983; Gitlin & Russell, 1994; Kretovics & Nussel, 1994; McDermott, 1987; Payne, 1984; Varenne & McDermott, 1999). Decades of sound educational research and reform have done little to disrupt familiar patterns of school success and failure that reflect and reinforce existing disparities of race, ethnicity, and class. Building from this premise, I ask in this paper: How can university-based scholars of urban education do research that encourages, produces, or informs change in urban schools and the conditions that shape them? I refer to this work as activist research in urban education. I choose the word *activist* because this kind of research aims for more than understanding: it aims to change educational structures and institutions as well as the social conditions that shape them. Activist research is politically-engaged: it assumes education is inherently political—rooted in and shaped by political processes and relations of power—and that educational change is a political struggle (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1983; Kretovics & Nussel, 1994).

My commitment to activist research in urban education emerged during eight years of work as a teacher and researcher at a high poverty, urban, continuation high school in Northern California.¹ Like many educators, I entered teaching with a belief in the transformative power of education and a desire to effect change through emancipatory teaching and learning. As a graduate student, my interests and experiences led me to study the

relationships between failing urban schools and existing social inequalities. As I pursued these topics I grew increasingly convinced that the problems facing urban schools were not technical-educational ones to be solved through innovative pedagogical approaches, school restructuring, or by “motivating” low-achieving students. On the contrary, I came to see urban school failure and the “achievement gap” as essentially *political* problems, rooted in deep social-structural inequalities (Anyon, 1997, 2005; Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1983; Kretovics & Nussel, 1994; Varenne & McDermott, 1999). If we understand the problems of urban schools as political ones, we are led to a different set of research questions than those most frequently put forth by educational research. If they are *political* problems, then research questions should be focused on describing their political nature and elaborating political solutions.

Much has been written about the degree to which educational research might challenge, change, or simply reproduce existing patterns of inequality in schools. In this paper I review two sets of criticisms that have been leveled, implicitly or explicitly, at urban education research. These examine the political implications of the questions we ask (and don't ask), and the methods we use. Both critiques illustrate the limits of technical rationality (Habermas, 1970) as a paradigm guiding activist research in urban education (see also, Giroux, 1983; Klees, Rizzini & Dewees, 2000). In this dominant paradigm, school failure and educational inequality are framed as technical problems and best addressed through objective, empirical research. Research and practice are oriented toward a search for “best solutions” in the form of new curricula, school restructuring plans, packages, and programs. In contrast, I propose a paradigm of *political rationality*, borrowing this term from Klees et al. (2000). This paradigm emphasizes the political roots of urban school failure and educational inequality, and challenges urban education researchers to re-conceptualize both the questions we ask and the methods we use. I conclude by presenting a framework for activist research in urban education, and critically evaluate the limits and possibilities of such research for bringing about equity in education.

REPRODUCING OR CHALLENGING POWER IN THE QUESTIONS WE ASK: CRITIQUES AND INNOVATIONS IN CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS GUIDING URBAN EDUCATION RESEARCH

How we explain the failure of urban schools has a lot to do with how we explain the persistence of urban poverty—in particular, of concentrated, segregated, racialized poverty found in urban inner cities and poor, segregated suburbs (Payne, 1984). In both cases, victim-blaming explanations

are heavily circulated in U.S. culture and widely perceived as “commonsense” (Fine, Weiss, Weseen, & Wong, 2000; Kretovics & Nussel, 1994; Payne, 1984). Cognitive and cultural deficiency theories (those explaining minority underachievement as the result of lower intelligence or inferior cultural attributes) have been largely discredited among education researchers. Yet urban education research has (sometimes unwittingly) reinforced these commonsense theories that locate the causes of school failure inside the failing students themselves or the people closest to them—their parents, communities, teachers, or under-resourced schools (Fine et al., 2000; Gould, 1999; Payne, 1984; Varenne & McDermott, 1999). For nearly four decades, urban education research has focused on, or at least touched on, the question of why predictable (and racialized) patterns of school success and failure persist year after year, generation after generation, despite the popular ideal of education as an equalizer (Foley, 1991; Foster, 2004; McDermott, 1987; O’Connor, 1997; Payne, 1984). For obvious reasons, urban education researchers spend a lot of time in urban, high-poverty, low-performing schools, and over the years have amassed a large number of studies meticulously documenting the behaviors, attitudes, achievements, and identities of poor, urban youth. With so much attention focused on the “problem” of minority underachievement, and so much scholarly gaze focused on underachieving minorities themselves, it is not surprising that education research would reinforce prevailing myths of cognitive and cultural deficiency—despite conscious attempts to re-cast these as cultural “difference” or to construct counter-narratives of oppression and resistance. This tendency for educational research to reproduce dominant, commonsense narratives about urban poverty helps explain why the prospects for low-income urban youth and the schools they attend appear today as dismal as they ever were.

If we consider that every way of seeing is a way of not seeing, then we must consider what is being left out through our incessant focus on the achievement gap and the behaviors of underachieving youth. What questions are *not* being asked, and what people, institutions, and processes are being left out of our analysis altogether? I argue that prevailing conceptual frameworks in urban education serve to *decontextualize* urban schools from the broader social context that maintains urban school failure. This decontextualized analysis is also a *depoliticized* one because it treats the problems of urban schools in isolation from broader political-economic structures and relations of power (Kim, 2000).² Although many studies of urban schools account for the impacts of local context on teaching and learning—for example, concentrated poverty, institutionalized racism, joblessness in the community—these contextual factors are often taken as a departure point for analysis rather than subject to analysis themselves. By

deleting this broader analysis from the study of urban schooling, many studies of urban education fail to consider how the production and maintenance of segregated urban poverty is intricately connected with the persistence of under-resourced and poor-performing urban schools (Anyon, 1997). Moreover, decontextualized analyses obscure the possibility that privileged and powerful groups—or the economic practices, federal policies, and political structures that produce and maintain privilege—might also play a role in producing and maintaining urban school failure.

The role of public policies and economic practices in sponsoring “white flight” suburbanization in the post-WWII era has been amply documented (Anyon, 1997; Gratz & Mintz, 1998; Gregory, 1998; Kim, 2000; Pulido, 2000; Wilson, 1987, 1993). These studies suggest that concentrated and racialized urban poverty is not the inevitable result of impersonal economic forces, but the outcome of political maneuvering, policymaking, and corporate practices. If this is the case, many of the contextual factors that shape teaching and learning in under-resourced urban schools are rooted in political-economic structures and practices that extend far beyond the impoverished neighborhoods of these schools. However, the persistence of segregated urban poverty is often racialized as a “black problem” (or increasingly, a “Latino problem”) having to do with “needy places” (Gregory, 1998).³ Gregory argues that without a properly contextualized and historicized analysis, it can appear as though “needy places” bring the problems of poverty on themselves. In the same way, I argue that commonsense narratives of urban school failure—and often urban education research itself—locate the causes of school failure in “needy places” and implicitly assume solutions can be found without involving or having much impact on other kinds of students in other kinds of places. As a result, explanations of (and solutions to) minority underachievement are advanced while privileged and powerful social groups are left out of the equation altogether (Payne, 1984; Varenne & McDermott, 1999).

By leaving others out of the picture, urban school failure can be easily dismissed as a problem rooted in the individualized psychology of urban youth, families, and practitioners. This conceptual framework encourages research aimed at diagnosing and “fixing” these individuals so they better achieve inside present educational and social systems. Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade (2005) refers to this research agenda as “the package fetish”—an incessant search for the right program or package to fix our poor urban schools (Duncan-Andrade, 2005). Decades of educational research have spawned many school reforms—new curricula, new pedagogy, new academic standards, school restructuring, smaller and more nurturing schools, to name a few. While these reforms provide some benefits for failing urban schools and poor urban youth, they hardly make up for

existing inequalities or come close to equalizing opportunity and achievement (Kretovics & Nussel, 1994; Anyon, 2005). Jean Anyon (2005) claims: "Sometimes these reforms work to make urban schools less stressful, disturbing places—and achievement scores may tick upwards. But if truth be told, these educational improvements rarely affect the material trajectory of most students' lives. A better K-12 education does not increase a child's life chances when there is no decent job the diploma will attract, and no funding that will stay with the graduate through a college degree" (p. 13). In other words, reforms and programs are only a small part of the puzzle. To inform meaningful change in educational outcomes and opportunities for poor urban youth, we need to employ a more contextualized and politicized analysis of urban schooling.

In their account of youth poverty programs in Brasil, authors Klees et al. (2000) critique the popular emphasis on developing replicable programs to combat youth poverty. They argue this program-focused research agenda is rooted in the dominant paradigm of technical rationality: "To solve educational and other social problems, the logic of this [technically rational] approach calls for a research and evaluation effort to identify or develop the programs needed—for street children, for rural children, for increasing achievement, for dropout prevention, for drug education, for health promotion, and so forth. The assumption is that once a good pilot or model program exists, it can be replicated until the problem is solved" (p. 81). The dominance of this paradigm is not unique to Brazil: Technical rationality throughout the world "has offered us a profusion of educational solutions" such as new technologies, pedagogies, and school governance structures (p. 82). Klees et al. argue the dominant paradigm of technical rationality reflects a false belief that youth poverty results from a lack of sufficient knowledge or competent program implementation.⁴ In contrast, they claim youth poverty results from political-economic structures and practices that maintain poverty in general. Technically rational innovations are bound to fail at the goal of reducing poverty because "they ignore the political rationality that maintains, reproduces, and often exacerbates inequality" (p. 82).

Contrasting with the dominant paradigm of technical rationality, Klees et al. advance an alternative paradigm of "political rationality" (p. 82) that emphasizes the political roots of poverty and informs political solutions such as social movement building. In the same way, my experience and research in urban schools lead me to believe educational inequities in the U.S. do not result primarily from a lack of technical knowledge about how to teach children. These inequities persist, despite a dominant discourse of equal opportunity and decades of sound educational research, because educational credentials continue to play such an important role in

preserving, transmitting, and legitimizing privilege. Rather than a lack of technical knowledge, a lack of political will to equalize education (indeed, fierce resistance to equalization) appears to be at the root of the unequal opportunities and outcomes of concern to urban education researchers: for accounts of fierce resistance by privileged parents to equity-based school reforms, see Kozal, 1991; Noguera, 2001; Wells & Serna, 1996. Therefore, the politics of privilege, and the role of privileged or “successful” groups in maintaining resource inequality, must be central in activist urban education research. Reflecting the logic of political rationality, I argue urban education research questions should foreground the political nature of educational inequality and seek to inform political, rather than technical, interventions.

In summary, I have argued prevailing conceptual frameworks portray urban school failure as a localized, organizational, or pedagogical issue, and only secondarily (if at all) as a political issue that is intricately tied to relations of power and privilege. If problems like urban school failure and minority underachievement are rooted in misguided or ineffective policies—for example, in pedagogy, school policies, school governance structures, or school size—then urban education research should continue the task of identifying and treating these problems locally. But if the problems facing urban schools are rooted elsewhere—for example, in relations of power and inequality that extend beyond the urban context, in the economic practices and federal policies that maintain segregated and concentrated urban poverty—then urban education researchers also have a duty to expose these connections and inform political solutions. Meeting this challenge entails a conceptual shift away from thinking about school failure, achievement gaps, and educational inequality as “things” to be fixed, and toward a view of these as social relations. Increasingly, urban education researchers are shifting the organizing questions of their work in this way, reflecting the logic of “political rationality” and reshaping the contours of what constitutes “urban education” research.

New Directions Urban Education Research: A Paradigm of Political Rationality

Many urban education researchers have developed more contextualized and politicized analyses of urban schooling. For example, Anyon (1997, 2005) has described how federal policies and political-economic practices produced and continue to maintain segregated, concentrated urban poverty as well as segregated, high-poverty and low-achieving urban schools. Contextualizing urban poverty in this way provides a deeper understanding of what is happening to urban youth and their schools, because the practices

that produce the “context” of urban schools are at work inside those schools, shaping the lives of students and their communities. Other contextualized analyses of urban schools explore the relation between urban areas and other kinds of places, for example, wealthy suburbs. Buck and Silvester (2005) state: “studying the city without studying the suburb obscures the connections between the two—the fact that all’s well in an elite suburb is not separate from the challenges faced by those in the city but rather part of the same ecology that has grown out of balance” (p. 219; see also Varenne & McDermott, 1999). If we take this relational framework seriously, the construct of “urban education” itself becomes problematic: A study of “urban” schools that does not incorporate their relationship to other kinds of schools in other kinds of places is likely to depoliticize school inequality by decontextualizing it. Some educational researchers expand the notion of “context” to include the ideological matrix within which everyday practices of schooling—and educational research—operate. For example, Leck (1994) has pointed out that educational research and educational practice are not two separate worlds, but part of the same overarching discourse. Similarly, Varenne and McDermott (1999) insist we cannot understand education from within the commonsense, taken-for-granted categories of dominant educational discourse (see also Apple, 1990). These authors suggest that educational researchers should examine the questions we ask (and the assumptions, biases, and categories embedded in them) as an essential part of understanding the cultural logic of schooling.

At this point, readers may rightly wonder how we can develop more contextualized analyses of urban schools without straying into the realm of general sociology or even grand theory. How can we, as education researchers, practically study and speak about such a wide range of issues? From what I have argued, it seems a fully contextualized analysis of urban school failure would take us so far away from schools that we would no longer be talking about “education” at all. One helpful model for dealing with this challenge is found in Anyon’s (2005) recent work, *Radical Possibilities*. In this work, Anyon emphasizes the interconnectedness of urban schools, urban poverty, federal policy and political economy. She illustrates these connections through reviews of empirical research on issues such as minimum wage laws, federal tax policy, and public transportation policy. Anyon claims we cannot significantly improve urban schools without addressing these interrelated issues of urban poverty. Yet rather than straying from the field of “education,” Anyon *redefines what constitutes education policy*. Her “new paradigm of education policy” (p. 13) includes such policies as minimum wage laws, residential desegregation, public transportation policy, job creation programs, and federal tax policy. These all should be “counted” as education policy since they inarguably affect—in

significant and measurable ways—the quality of educational opportunity and achievement for large groups of youth. Anyon’s new paradigm of education policy offers a significant contribution toward a more contextualized, politicized analysis of urban education. Some readers may argue that topics like wages, housing, transportation and taxation fall outside the purview of “education” research. It is undoubtedly difficult to incorporate this broad range issues—both methodologically and logistically. Mastering the literature across so many topics is impossible, and research in this paradigm inevitably risks sacrificing depth for breadth. While these challenges and concerns are important, I believe it is precisely this isolation of “education” research from the generative context of schools that has enabled the prevalence of decontextualized and depoliticized approaches to urban education research. Rather than give up attempts to investigate these connections in our work, I believe urban education researchers should continue broadening our analysis of the urban context and the politics of urban school failure.

In this section, I have argued the central questions driving urban education research lead us toward decontextualized and thus depoliticized analyses of urban school failure. These prevailing conceptual frameworks take the conditions of segregated urban poverty as a departure point for analysis, and seek to develop programs that treat failure as individualized psychological or organizational problems. In contrast, I have argued urban education research should contextualize urban schooling within the production of racialized urban poverty, and seek to inform political interventions addressing the political-economic roots of urban school failure. In the next section I continue to trace the limits of technical rationality as a paradigm for activist research in urban education, this time by focusing on the methods we use. I discuss how critiques of technically-rational (positivist) methods have spawned new forms of engaged, collaborative, and participatory research in urban education. These engaged research methods reflect the logic of political rationality and mark a positive step toward urban education research that promotes social change.

REPRODUCING OR CHALLENGING POWER IN THE METHODS WE USE: CRITIQUES AND INNOVATIONS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Many educational researchers have turned a self-reflexive and critical lens on their own work, examining the ways in which research methods can reproduce or challenge existing power relations. Building from the work of feminist, postcolonial, postmodern, and critical theories, education scholars have engaged with critiques of qualitative and ethnographic field

methods—a practice that, in urban education, necessarily entails the production of “expert” knowledge about the “Other.” The politics of ethnography have been challenged and debated by critical social scientists for some time now (Brettell, 1993; Fine, 1994; Fine et al., 2000; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Foley, 1994; Ladson Billings, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 2005/1999; Wolf, 1996). Authors who write from these theoretical positions often claim to speak as, with, or on behalf of, persons and groups who have been marginalized and silenced by ethnographic research and scholarship. At the heart of these discussions is a basic critique of positivism as an epistemological framework—by which I mean “a ‘system of knowing’ that has both an internal logic and external validity” (Ladson Billings, 2000, p. 257). In this paper, I use the term “critical alternative epistemologies” to encompass the range of feminist, postcolonial, postmodern, and critical theories that share a basic critique of positivism and have advanced compelling challenges to ethnographic field methods. I recognize these theoretical traditions are distinct, that each has its own internal debates, diversity, and nuance, and that I risk conflating important differences by subsuming these diverse theoretical positions under a single category. However, my purpose is to sketch out key aspects of a broad positivist critique, to consider how they apply to research in urban schools, and to show how these concerns are shaping alternative paradigms in urban education research. Since critiques of positivism are amply elaborated elsewhere [see, for example, Ladson Billings, 2000; Lather, 1986, 1992; Maguire, 1987; Tuhiwai Smith, 2005/1999; Wolf, 1996], I will limit my discussion to those points that I believe have most relevance for research in urban education, and are most influential in shaping alternative paradigms in educational research.

Core assumptions of positivism include the assertion that true knowledge exists “out there” to be “discovered” through research; that objective truth can thus be unveiled and measured through neutral, empirically testable methods; that these methods are reproducible; that true knowledge is value-free, universal, and above politics; and hence, if the correct methods are used, the researcher’s personal biases are irrelevant. These underlying assumptions, which are rooted in the natural sciences, suggest that qualitative and ethnographic researchers should aspire to a neutral outsider position in the field. Positivist assumptions have shaped the narrative style of traditional ethnographic writing, in which the author maintains a detached objectivity and makes herself invisible in the text in order to portray her conclusions as authoritative, complete, and unbiased (Behar, 1996; Foley, 1994). The assumption that research should be neutral—aimed at discovering true knowledge rather than *changing* social structures—means that authors couch their conclusions behind a veil of presumed objectivity. To admit a political

position, intimacy with, or empathy for, the subjects would bias the study and invalidate its findings.

Yet this stance of detached objectivity raises a host of practical, ethical, and political dilemmas for researchers who care about and/or identify with the people they study. Many feminists and scholars of color, for example, have conducted fieldwork on/with other women and communities of color, and have acknowledged their identification with (and empathy for) their subjects, as well as the role of their own subjectivity in shaping their choice of topic. They have asserted that researchers never enter the field as disinterested observers but with biases, sympathies, assumptions, and positionalities (i.e. age, gender, race, class, nationality) that shape the questions they ask, the responses they get, and the things they “see.” Many have pointed out the exploitative nature of ethnographic fieldwork—a process through which researchers enter the lives of others, earn their trust, listen to their stories, tragedies and fears, only to leave the field with those stories in hand and proceed to analyze, interpret, theorize, and objectify them for personal and professional gain (Behar, 1996; Burowoy, 1991; Fine et al., 2000; Wolf, 1996). The researcher alone decides the choice of subjects, definition of the problem, source of the analytic categories employed, the appropriateness of theories applied to interpreting the words. Ultimately, the researcher decides what stories to include and what to take out; what to edit and where to cut; and how to interpret, frame, contextualize, and analyze those stories. The stories no longer belong to the informants, but become data for a story the researcher has power to tell, by virtue of her educational credentials and relative position of power. Often, the researcher is neither invested in nor accountable to the persons and communities she has studied and written about. This unequal relation of power between the observer and the observed reflects and reproduces a colonial-like relationship, and this is punctuated by the fact that most researchers occupy multiple positions of privilege in relation to their informants—especially in terms of race, class, and educational credentials.

In contrast to the assumption of universal, value-free knowledge, critical alternative epistemologies assert that all knowledge is partial, situated, constructed in practice, and tied to relations of power. In the production of scientific knowledge, they point out that some voices are systematically silenced (Fine, 1994; Foster, 1994; Wolf, 1996); some interpretations are considered valid and others are devalued (Gaventa, 1993; Gitlin & Russell, 1994; LeCompte, 1995; Maguire, 1987); and some approaches reproduce dominant categories, frameworks and assumptions that legitimize and strengthen the present social order (Apple, 1990; Fine et al., 2000; Gould, 1999; Ladson Billings, 2000; Payne, 1984; Varenne & McDermott, 1999). Critical alternative epistemologies share in a belief that positivist

paradigms of knowledge production, although cloaked in the legitimizing veil of objectivity and neutrality, in fact embody and conceal a particular set of political interests that help to maintain and legitimize existing power relations. They challenge the assumption that research should merely explain the social world. Reflecting the Freirean idea that all education serves the purpose of domination or liberation (Freire, 1970/1999), they hold all *knowledge production* either serves or challenges systems of domination (Apple, 1990; Gaventa, 1993; Gitlin & Russell, 1994; Hall, 1992; Maguire, 1987). Scholars writing from these theoretical positions advocate forms of research that explicitly challenge oppressive social structures and inequalities.

As an “applied” field, educational research aims to be useful and thus provides an especially fertile ground for research designed to change educational outcomes. Often, collaboration with practitioners is sought as a way to increase the likelihood that research findings will be implemented in practice (Feuer, Towne, & Shavelson, 2002; LeCompte, 1995). While such collaborations reduce the power disparities between researcher and subject, many of these efforts stem from pragmatic concerns about implementation rather than political commitments to the positivist critique outlined above. In this paper I discuss contemporary innovations in educational research that are informed, instead, by critical alternative epistemologies. Building on the positivist critique outlined above, many urban education researchers are carving out new forms of activist research, which I roughly categorize as engaged, collaborative, and participatory research. These approaches, in varying degrees, reconceptualize scholarship as a process done *with* (rather than *on*) urban youth, families, and practitioners. They mark a positive shift toward urban education research that more effectively informs and contributes to social change.

New Directions in Urban Education Research: Toward Activist Participatory Research

Recognizing that liberatory knowledge is co-constructed through critical dialogue and *praxis* (Freire, 1970/1999), many education researchers have developed projects that engage practitioners in dialogue and action to address issues of equity, access, and achievement (Gitlin & Russell, 1994; Noguera & Wing, 2006). Some position themselves as advocates by joining existing community-based movements (Fuentes, 2005; Kwon, 2005) or using their research to influence educational policy or legislation (Fine et al., 2000; Foley & Valenzuela, 2005). Angela Valenzuela, for example, helped author a bill for a more just multiple assessment as an alternative to existing high-stakes testing in Texas (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005; Valenzuela et al.,

2006). Working collaboratively with graduate students, the group gathered information about state testing policies; disseminated information to families, students, practitioners and policymakers; and testified at the state legislature in favor of a more just multiple-assessment approach. The project integrated critical and collaborative research (with graduate students), movement building (disseminating information), and advocacy (lobbying state legislators). At the same time, it produced new scholarly knowledge about the politics of assessment, educational policy formation, and the maintenance of educational inequality.

Another model of engaged collaborative research in education is to implement an educational intervention, which then becomes the basis for data collection and theorizing. Educational interventions aim to have an immediate impact on the participants as well as a longer-lasting impact as the participants apply the lessons learned in other aspects of their lives—as teachers, administrators, students, or advocates. For example, the Funds of Knowledge project (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) trained teachers in ethnographic research and instituted study groups with the goal of improving trust and understanding between teachers and families, and ultimately, improving teacher practice. The Futures Project (Collatos & Morrell, 2003) trained high school youth of color in critical social theory, research, and skills for college access, with the goal of empowering youth to become agents of change and to attend four-year universities. While these two projects differed in significant ways, both involved researchers in the implementation of an educational intervention aimed at changing educational practice and outcomes. In both cases, researchers helped initiate the program, collected data on its participants, and drew from their experience to theorize and write about issues relevant to education: community funds of knowledge, teacher professional development, social reproduction, and college access.

In all of these examples, researchers broke from the passive role of detached observer, and reframed the relationship between observer and observed as one of solidarity and engagement. Through active collaboration, these projects reduced the power disparity between researcher and subject. But these projects also maintained, (in varying degrees), the distinction between the researcher as expert and the practitioners/students/families as recipients of expert knowledge. In contrast, what I call *participatory research* is a model of inquiry that aims to eliminate this distinction altogether by reframing all participants as co-investigators in a process of collective inquiry and action (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Hall, 1992; Hernández Castillo, 2006; Maguire, 1987; Park, 1993; Vio Grossi, 1981). As I use this term, participatory research is an alternative paradigm of democratic knowledge production, *not* simply the inclusion of “subjects” in

a research project. In its purest form, participatory research is a process through which groups who are adversely affected by a social problem undertake collective study to understand and address it. It is based on the assertion that all people are capable of understanding the social forces that shape the conditions of their lives. Research questions emerge from shared lived experiences, and the group retains control over every phase of a research process—from developing questions and methods, to interpreting and using the results as the basis for collective action. In the end, the knowledge is collectively owned by all who co-created it, not a socially-recognized expert.

It is important to point out that participatory research does not require a university-based researcher; in fact, community-based organizations engage in forms of participatory research all the time, often without naming it as such or without writing about it. In addition, I make a distinction between participatory research as a *program*—often implemented as an educational intervention to empower youth—and participatory research as an *alternative paradigm of knowledge production*. In the former, participatory research (also called participatory action research, or PAR) is incorporated into the curriculum for youth development programs that engage youth through critical inquiry and action. These programs have proliferated in recent years, as evidenced by a special issue of *Practicing Anthropology* dedicated to youth PAR (Vol. 26, No. 2, Spring 2004) and several other accounts (Cammarota, 2005; Collatos & Morrell, 2003; Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernández, 2003; London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003; The John Gardener Center for Youth and Their Communities, 2001). I recognize the power and potential of these programs to foster critical consciousness and political engagement among youth, but my use of *participatory research* in this article refers to earlier uses of this term, which are often associated with popular education and community organizing in the 1960s and 1970s (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Hall, 1992; Hernández Castillo, 2006; Vio Grossi, 1981). In this model, participatory research is defined as an open-ended inquiry/action process in which a university-based researcher may contribute, but does not control the questions, methods, timeline, or products of the study. In theory, participatory research aims to democratize the production of knowledge in order to challenge “technocracy,” or the rule by experts (Gaventa, 1993; Prajuli, 1986). This is seen as a path toward democratizing social relations and public institutions.

This level of full collaboration with “subjects” is not the only (nor always the best) way to do activist research in urban education; however, participatory research as an alternative paradigm of knowledge production offers important lessons and tools for strengthening such work. In particular, participatory research pushes the definition of “collaboration” one

step further, and calls on university-based researchers to consider difficult questions about the social production of knowledge and our own expertise. Taken together, the innovations I have discussed in this section—engaged, collaborative, and participatory research—mark a positive shift toward urban education research that better informs and contributes to social change. Implementing this type of research from a university-based position brings particular logistical, political, and ethical challenges. In the next section I discuss these challenges by reflecting on my own attempt to practice activist participatory research in urban education. Although I focus on the limitations and dangers of this work, my intention is not to discourage but to strengthen similar initiatives of engaged, collaborative, and participatory research in urban education.

CHALLENGES OF ENGAGED, COLLABORATIVE, AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN URBAN EDUCATION

Influenced by critical alternative epistemologies and the literature on participatory research, I developed a joint research project in partnership with three of my former high school students. I had previously worked as a classroom teacher at Jackson High School—a high-poverty, urban continuation high school in Northern California, and I maintained relationships with some students after leaving the job to pursue a Ph.D. in Education. As an idealistic young graduate student, I felt strongly about developing a project that reflected my intellectual interests, my sense of research ethics, and my political commitment to educational equity. Further, I wanted to be accountable to the youth I worked with and the school community that we shared, not only to my colleagues in academia. I proposed the idea for a shared project to three youth with whom I had maintained strong relationships, and they enthusiastically agreed to participate. I secured funding to offer a small stipend for their time, and we began weekly meetings to discuss the project. We identified our shared community as Jackson High School, and defined our goal as follows: “To study and address the social issues affecting the lives and education of Jackson students.” We discussed the different insights, skills, and experiences that each of us brought to this endeavor, and we thought of a name for our group: The Participatory Action Research Team for Youth (PARTY). There was no fixed timeline, curriculum, or outcome; all of these were developed collaboratively through weekly meetings and phone conversations. Over two years, we conducted a survey of students at Jackson High School, interviews of students and teachers, weekly discussions of national and international news stories, and reviews of

lesson plans and curricula designed to foster political participation. We used this information to develop and teach a weekly youth-led Government course at Jackson High School with the stated purpose of building critical consciousness and political engagement.

In my work with PARTY, I integrated three simultaneous tasks: Participatory research (an inquiry); a youth-led Government course (an educational intervention); and an ethnographic study (data collection, analysis, and writing done by me on the youth participants). My experience and that of others (Cammarota, 2005; Collatos & Morrell, 2003; Dyrness, 2004; Koirala, 2004; Moll et al., 1992; Sanchez, 2004) suggests it is possible to wear the multiple hats of participant, educator, and scholar in the implementation of a single research project—and that doing so can enrich the quality and impact of our research. Yet I also believe it is important to ask ourselves when we can and should wear multiple hats, and when we should not. What do we lose when active engagement with our “subjects” comes first? Reflecting on my experience and my reading of other activist research projects, I identify practical, political, and ethical challenges of this work. The first practical challenge is logistical difficulty: the separation between researchers and subjects is institutionalized and enforced through a division of labor and professional norms that discourage (and make logistically difficult) engaged collaboration with practitioners, families, and youth (Gitlin & Russell, 1994; Payne, 1984). Moreover, participants in collaborative projects inevitably come with different (and often competing) agendas, interests, and timelines, making conflict a central feature of these projects (LeCompte, 1995). In my experience with PARTY, conflict, competing agendas, and demands on the participants’ time almost led the project to dissolve after one year without accomplishing much of anything. Maguire (1993) described a similar experience in her attempt to conduct participatory research, and claims: “Collective work is messy and time-consuming. People may decide not to take action. They will surely not become empowered, liberated, or transformed on our schedules” (p. 176).

A second set of challenges is political in nature. Calling a project collaborative does not necessarily mean all members participated with equal power in defining the goals and means of the project, or even whether to do it in the first place. This is especially so in projects that are conceived, initiated, and led by university-based researchers. No matter how sincere the attempt to equalize power between observer and observed, divisions of race, gender, class, and age are often reproduced within collaborative groups of co-researchers. In my work with PARTY, I occupied multiple positions of privilege in relation to the youth participants. I was a former teacher and a white woman with advanced educational credentials, and my co-researchers were non college-bound, low-income youth who originally

knew me as their teacher; they included African American, Latino, Filipino, and white youth. Despite making all decisions by consensus, these existing power relations were reproduced within the group: I spoke for the group at several conferences and in writing; I controlled most communication with school personnel; I facilitated meetings and typed up the minutes; I received and controlled the project's limited funds; and I earned differential rewards for participation. This last point is important to emphasize: University-based researchers have compelling material incentives to do research, but other participants often do not. Co-researchers sometimes receive a stipend for their time (as PARTY members did), and in the best case scenario, they reap concrete rewards in the form of changed policies or institutional practices that affect their lives. At the end of the day, however, university-based researchers may find ourselves asking others to participate in projects that ultimately serve our own professional and academic interests. In these ways, collaborative and participatory research projects risk reproducing the same unequal power relations as more conventional research.

Another political risk of activist research is the tendency to romanticize our own (modest) projects by re-labeling them as "activism" and dressing them up in the language of radical-sounding theory. Conflating our research with activism runs the risk of focusing too much attention (our own and others') on our academic projects when this energy could be better spent on real activism. As Patai (1994) writes: "Perhaps conscience-stricken by the realization of their own privilege, many intellectuals today... pretend that whenever they write an article they are 'doing politics'" (pp. 67–68). We must remember that challenging power in scholarly articles is not the same as challenging power on the ground—through community organizing, social advocacy, or movement building. When working with the PARTY group, I sometimes wondered whether I was diverting political and intellectual resources on the politics of the academy instead of the politics that count. Along with the danger of political diversion, activist scholarship can lend itself to a kind of self-promotional and self-aggrandizing writing, especially when we write about projects we helped to initiate and lead. I have found that some authors begin their articles with sophisticated critiques of positivist research and theoretical discussions of critical alternative epistemologies. These hyper-intellectual introductory sections are often followed by descriptions of modest, small-scale projects that look a great deal like ordinary reforms or educational interventions—for example, a teacher dialogue circle (Gitlin & Russell, 1994), collaborative inquiry with school district administrators (LeCompte, 1995), a battered women's support group (Maguire, 1987), or my own project, a youth-led civic education class (Nygren, 2005). Experiencing this disjuncture in my own work—between

radical theory and small-scale, reformist practice—I have written about the challenge of implementing activist research on the ground without subsuming it into a program that looks decisively “everyday”, and not unlike “the package fetish” critiqued earlier.

A final set of considerations is ethical in nature. Participatory research projects tend to be small in scale, involving one university-based researcher and a small team of co-researchers (e.g. (Comstock & Fox, 1993; Dyrness, 2004; Koirala, 2004; Maguire, 1987; Sanchez, 2004). These projects are necessarily open-ended, often messy, and always risky—because co-researchers might care about different kinds of issues, or take the project in different directions, than the university-based researcher would. For example, I expected my work with PARTY would lead to an intervention at Jackson High School, but I originally hoped we would target school policy, equity issues, or college access. Instead, the youth chose a youth-led Government course. As we developed and taught the course, I consistently pushed to make it more “academic”—to emphasize reading and writing skills, academic success, and college preparation. But although I had a voice in the group, the youth felt strongly that traditional school assignments would alienate students and thus undermine our pedagogical and political goals. The course ended up looking much different than one I would have developed on my own. These unpredictable outcomes occurred because I made a conscious choice to prioritize democratic decision-making at every step, and to trust the wisdom and expertise of my co-researchers as equal to my own. I learned that sharing control of a project means it will likely go in unanticipated directions, and these may contradict our own political sympathies and goals. Co-researchers might take projects in ways that we believe to be ineffective, decisively reformist, or worse, that reproduce the same inequalities we hoped they would challenge. When our “romanticized images of the resistor” (Fine et al., 2000, p. 117) are not born out in practice, we may be left disappointed and demoralized (Maguire, 1993).

This raises an ethical dilemma about the ulterior purposes of participatory research projects. Many who initiate this kind research—myself included—run the risk of paying lip service to “popular knowledge” while, in reality, our goal is to get “them” to see the world like “we” do. If one goal of participatory research is to “change” the participants so they adopt, for example, a more structural analysis of inequality, this raises the possibility of manipulation and cooptation (Hernández Castillo, 2006). It also raises the question of what happens when our collaborators do not share a structural analysis of inequality even after years of critical dialogue and collective research. Can we truly value their popular knowledge and interpretations while simultaneously asserting a structural analysis as the “correct” one? The persistence of this contradiction underscores the degree to

which engaged, collaborative, and participatory research projects are often thinly-disguised educational interventions—and raises the question of how we might distinguish between our educational interventions and research projects? Perhaps this question presents a false dichotomy, if we consider that all education is research and all research is education (Hurst, 2002). But if we believe there is still a role for more traditional forms of university-based research—and I do—then I believe we must be willing to engage questions about what we sacrifice (and gain) when research, education and activism are conceptually and literally collapsed into one single process. As more educational researchers push the limits of engaged, collaborative, and participatory research, I hope we will engage these questions seriously rather than dismiss them as reactionary criticism.

Despite the challenges and dangers I have discussed, the possibilities of engaged, collaborative, and participatory research for effecting change in urban education are great, and these kinds of projects should be continued and expanded. In the final section, I synthesize these possibilities and constraints to propose a framework for activist research in urban education. This is not meant as a blueprint for research, but rather to suggest a set of guiding principles, questions and considerations to guide university-based researchers committed to working with urban youth, families, and practitioners for social and educational change.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS: A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTIVIST RESEARCH IN URBAN EDUCATION

I have argued that a paradigm of political rationality offers a lens through which to expose the root causes of school inequality and to develop a research practice that is democratic in its process and its aims. More contextualized (and politicized) analyses of urban schools have helped to illuminate the root causes of educational inequality, and to improve our understanding about the links between federal policies, economic practices, and educational outcomes. While this kind of understanding is the first step toward effecting change, I also recognize that understanding a problem rarely changes it. Research that aims to change structures, institutions, and relations must go beyond understanding and explaining. But exactly *how* we get beyond is not self-evident. In traditional educational research, the relationship between knowledge production and educational change is indirect: If we are lucky, our findings will influence a policymaker, practitioner, or community advocate. This, in turn, will influence a policy or program or curriculum. Then, hopefully, a tangible benefit will trickle down to the schools, practitioners, students or

families. In this model, the anticipated changes come later, if at all, and only indirectly. In contrast, engaged, collaborative and participatory research aim to embed change in the research process itself, creating a more direct relationship between knowledge production and educational practice or policy change. Examples of this kind of research—many of which I have reviewed in this paper—are already making significant differences for many urban schools, practitioners, youth, and families. But recognizing these are not a panacea, I also discussed the practical, political, and ethical challenges of this work.

In developing a framework for activist research in urban education, it is important to emphasize that critical alternative epistemologies are not a substitute for more traditional research and advocacy that target public policy change. Norma González (2005) recently urged educational anthropologists to engage more actively in public policy debates. She emphasized the need to produce research that critically evaluates existing education policy; speaks directly to the concerns of policymakers; and frames conclusions in ways that policymakers and the public understand. This framing work entails a willingness to make generalizing claims—something ethnographers are reluctant to do because we understand truth as relative, contextualized, historically situated, and contingent. Reflecting on González's words, I thought: If we want to make an impact on public education, it helps to speak a disciplinary language of power—one that commands respect in the corporate and policy-making world. Educational ethnography does not have much currency in this world, and activist participatory research will undoubtedly have even less. While I certainly do not suggest abandoning qualitative, alternative, and participatory research for more "powerful" (positivist, universalizing) disciplinary discourses, I agree with González on the need for activist researchers in education to communicate more effectively with wider public audiences.

Engaged, collaborative, and participatory research projects tend to be small in nature and affect a limited number of students (or adults). They can have more impact when the youth (or adult) co-researchers become spokespersons and advocates for policy changes that affect their schools and communities. But these projects could be more powerful still if linked together in partnership to create a critical mass of articulate spokespersons advocating for social, political, and policy changes on behalf of their own communities. Thus, an important next step for building social change through urban education research is not only to implement engaged, collaborative, and participatory research projects, but also to build networks among these projects. Diverse types of engaged, collaborative, and participatory research projects might work independently on a day-to-day

basis but also as a coordinated effort toward a common vision of research for educational equity. These projects can find allies in scholars doing more traditional forms of research and advocacy that target public policy change. As an idealistic graduate student informed by critical alternative epistemologies, I might have dismissed any research project that smacked of positivism, along with any discourse that pandered to or legitimized such methods. Today, though I continue to engage seriously with critiques of positivist research, I also see the value of learning to converse in disciplinary discourses of power—much as critical pedagogy calls on students to both *master* and *critique* the culture of power (Delpit, 1988). Urban education researchers—including those of us trained in and committed to ethnographic, alternative, and participatory methods—should work to produce research that speaks convincingly to education policy-makers and the public. This work should be seen as a parallel effort alongside the expanded use of engaged, collaborative, and participatory research.

I opened this paper with the proposition that urban education research, a distinct specialization within the field of education, is centrally concerned with educational equity and social change. Despite this orientation toward social change, however, decades of urban education research have arguably done little to improve the fate of poor-performing urban schools or the life chances for poor urban youth. In this paper I have explored why this is so, and my inquiry led me to interrogate two broad aspects of urban educational research: the questions we ask and the methods we use. In both cases, I critiqued the dominant paradigm of technical rationality—one in which school failure is approached as a technical or scientific problem in need of “best solutions” unveiled through neutral, objective, and experimental research methods. In contrast, I proposed a paradigm of “political rationality” (borrowing this term from Klees et al., 2000) that approaches school failure *and* research practice as political issues situated within and shaped by social relations of power. Employing the logic of political rationality in urban education research has led to many promising innovations, including more contextualized and politicized analyses of urban schools and the expanded use of engaged, collaborative, and participatory research. Drawing on my reading of this work as well as my experience implementing a participatory research project at an urban school, I proposed a framework for activist research in urban education, and critically evaluated the limits and possibilities of such work to effect change in urban schools. It is my hope that this framework will contribute to ongoing efforts to transform urban education research in ways that transform urban schools and the social conditions that shape them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Soo Ah Kwon, Charlotte Biltekoff, Grace Wang, Glynda Hull, Stuart Tannock, Ingrid Seyer-Ochi, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and an anonymous reviewer at *The Urban Review* for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Any errors or oversights are, of course, my own. I also thank Sofia Villenas for encouraging me to submit this paper for publication. I owe special thanks to the youth at Jackson High School—especially D, Suil, Lolo, Leila, and Louis—for providing the inspiration and the human purpose behind all of this work. In addition, I am indebted to the Center for Participatory Research and Popular Education (CPEPR) at the Graduate School of Education, UC Berkeley, which nurtured both a physical and intellectual space for this type of work.

NOTES

1. Continuation high schools are public high schools to which students are involuntarily transferred due to a shortage of credits, failing grades and truancy. As a result, almost all continuation high school students can be labeled “low-achieving.”
2. My argument about how *decontextualized* analyses serve to *depoliticize* issues of urban schools is informed by Claire Jean Kim’s (2000) analysis of race relations in New York City. Although Kim does not discuss urban schooling, she argues that prevailing interpretations of urban racial conflict are decontextualized and thus depoliticized. I believe her argument about race relations aptly applies to prevailing interpretations of urban school failure. In this section I borrow her terminology and the logic of her argument to make a similar point about urban education research.
3. Gregory (1998) does not discuss urban schools specifically, but I borrow his argument about “needy places” in the commonsense narratives of Black poverty in New York City. I believe this argument aptly applies to prevailing frameworks in urban education as well.
4. For similar critiques of technical rationality, see Habermas (1970), Foley (1991, pp. 170–176), and Giroux (1983).

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