MOTHERSCHOLAR[1] TEACHER ACTIVISTS

Enacting Democratic Processes Between Neoliberal Institutions

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In-the-field education practitioners can serve as gate-*openers* for spaces where the academy intersects with K–12 schools. Cann and DeMeulenaere (2020) refer to "Lord Gatekeeper" as one who "upholds the traditions of academia as performed by the imagined older, white, male scholar, in ivory/ivy covered towers, closing the gate to those who don't fit the description or are found guilty of 'thinking while Black'" (p. 10). As practitioner-scholars, we often find ourselves acting as a pry-bar that forces open that in-between space where K–12 practice interacts with the university's research and scholarship. In our setting we, two motherscholar-practitioner-activists, work in the gap between

our large state university (where we earned/are earning doctoral degrees), and a local school district run by White liberal business leaders from our medium-sized city. At times this feels like being "between a rock and a hard place" with an R-1 university desperate for grant funding on one side, and a financially at-risk[2] school district on the other. This is the school district where one of us worked for 20 years, and where *all* of our children attend/ed school. We bring multiple identities and positionalities to our praxis: one of us identifies as Black biracial; one of us is "socially positioned as White (for now)" (aka SPAWN).[3] We are undertaking different research trajectories, we are both teachers, at different grade levels; one of us was a school counselor and the other may be a principal or other building or district leader.

Our work together is sometimes fraught, sometimes joyful, and always *urgent*. Our college of education (COE) trains social justice teachers, but it also develops and disseminates problematic behaviorist intervention systems, including (name of program). Deficit-focused programs such as (initials of program) endeavor to *fix* children, when in fact it is not the children that are *broken* (Tuck, 2009). Many times, social justice and the need for grant funding are at odds. Our activism *insists upon a healthy and helpful connection* between the COE and teachers and other staff members that work directly with students. We, along with many passionate colleagues and friends, work together to challenge the status quo at the university, as well as in the public schools and our community as a whole.

When the authors decided (separately but within 2 years of each other) to pursue doctoral degrees, it was in an effort to secure some sort of *credential* that would allow us to speak with authority, and be heard, on the issues facing our schools, and public education as a whole. As lifelong educators, as "teachers at heart," we did not aspire to become intellectuals in the tradition of the White-male dominated "academy" so much as to be more powerful advocates within our communities, to be, perhaps "public scholars." The work of public scholars is wide-ranging and important. Leavy (2019), in her introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship*, lists 12 "expressions of public scholarship" (p. 6), from art installation to writing for nonprofit organizations. Citing Badgett (2015), she adds five more, including briefing policymakers and designing projects with community-based organizations. According to Huckaby and Crocker (2021), the "specific intellectual is immediately and concretely situated within struggles and concerned with the status, economic role, and political function of truth" (p. 3). These definitions resonate with our own identities as "activist educators."[4]

Our work has taken on a heightened sense of urgency in the past several years:

- As students are more racially segregated now than since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) due to the rise and support of school vouchers for private and charter schools, as well as the closure of local/community based schools (Frankenberg et al., 2019; Vohra, 2019). Students are aware of these forces (Rosiek & Kinslow, 2015) and the potential impact on their lives, and are resisting the status quo of separate and unequal (e.g., https://www.teenstakecharge.com).

- As students and families are increasingly aware of the oppressive power of standardized testing and the sorting and ranking of children (beginning, in our school district, with an "EasyCBM" test during the first week of Kindergarten and twice more during the school year), and are becoming more aware of the connections between standardized testing, racism and classism, and funding decisions at local, state, and federal levels.

- As students feel a rising sense of despair due to the existential threat of climate change (Ojala, 2012).

- And especially, as young people from all socioeconomic backgrounds are more cognizant of racial, gender-based, and economic violence, and are increasingly willing to speak out (Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016; Cohen & Kahne, 2011).

In this chapter we talk about some of our own work, to illustrate just one way of scholar-practitioners "doing" community activism. We hope readers will find the possible sources of hope and even inspiration for their own activities and struggles. Next, we complicate the situation by sharing some of the experiences we and our colleagues have had that have resulted in exclusion of practitioners: the nonengagement of the very people who are with children, and experience classroom reality on a daily basis—from the work of researchers at the university, including its COE, and hence from decision-making power. These experiences unveil the distance between the professed values of the university (e.g., individuality, freedom, creative expression, diversity, equity and inclusion, stewardship), the COE ("making education and social systems work for all") and their actions. Finally, we return to our own journeys as examples of the diverse pathways of teachers to the world of academia, and propose some alternative directions that practitioners and researchers might take, ones that we believe open up opportunities for more collaborative, creative thinking, and a more just and beautiful education for our young humans and for us, the adults who are committed to the ideals of "education as the practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994).

PRACTITIONER-SCHOLARS AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In a moment of a cross-racial and largely youth-led uprising stemming from the uncertainty of a Trump presidency, a pandemic that has interrupted traditional schooling and revealed and exacerbated inequalities, and ever

rising numbers of Black and Brown people murdered by law enforcement, the need for *academic labor* (as conceptualized by Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2020) is more urgent than ever. In this moment, we find ourselves strategizing together (while socially distanced) and also taking to the streets in solidarity with colleagues, *and* with our present and former students in an effort to dismantle systems of oppression. We demand freedom. We insist that education must become a tool for liberation and not another space of subjugation. Our work happens in classrooms, at public school board meetings, and in the streets. We, along with our scholar and practitioner colleagues, organize political actions, often with our students; practitioners turned scholars run for school board; scholar-activists provide research and data for practitioner-activists to help build their case. And of course, as teachers we support the burgeoning sociopolitical awareness and activist urges of our students.

In this chapter we tell our own stories as counter-narratives (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) to combat the racism, settler colonialism, and classism that plagues our schools since the first public school (only for rich White males) on Turtle Island was founded in Boston in 1635. Our work is inspired by critical pedagogy, critical race theory, and Indigenous feminism—all of which honor and employ the power of storytelling to challenge dominant White supremacist discourses in order to illustrate more deeply "broader social justice meaning" (Ladsen-Billings, 2013, p. 42). As both authors view our work and this writing with shared values yet through distinct positionalities, we are additionally influenced by Cann and DeMeulenaere's (2020) new methodological approach called critical co-constructed autoethnography that highlights collaboration "with attention to fighting systems of oppression in solidarity across difference (p. 19). Unlike Cann and DeMeulenaere, we do not write in direct dialogue with each other. However, we present our experiences as personal yet connected narratives that when taken together, can facilitate a more multifaceted understanding of the systems in which we struggle.

Author 2: As the world watched the Ferguson and Baltimore uprisings in response to Michael Brown's and Freddy Gray's murders in 2014 and 2015, I, along with a small group of educators and school counselors, joined together in effort to create curricula and educational opportunities for our students to help them understand the varied responses and historical context in which the uprisings took place in a way that "unsettles" and/or disrupts status quo assumptions. Understanding the power of a name, we quickly labeled the group #BlackLivesMatter (name of local school district) and brainstormed lessons and events. Within a week, our group was called into the district office for a meeting filled with other educators and

quite a few administrators seemingly eager to get on board, as a collective, to facilitate deeper understandings of structural and systemic anti-Black violence for their predominantly White students. Pushback from district higher-ups came immediately, and after many communications (and assumed backroom meetings) they sought to remove district association with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and events were renamed the #BlackLivesMatter Educational Series. The series culminated with nationally known Indigenous and Black speaker/lawyer/activist Gyasi Ross (First Peoples Fund, n.d.) visiting two high school classrooms as well as the community college's longhouse.

As a part of this effort, students in my ethnic studies classroom began a project to expand upon the lives and tragic deaths of the unarmed Black and Brown people whose stories have been compressed into hashtags since 2013. In our alternative high school we had some leeway in our curricular design, as well as with teaching "edgier" or resistance curricula. These students, who were reengaging with school after push-out, were eager to put in the work to challenge the usual narratives that other people tell about them, by sharing their own experiences around police brutality and impunity. They researched hundreds of unarmed Black and Brown victims of police violence, and wrote about their lives in ways that revealed them to be sons and daughters, parents; whole humans with dreams and aspirations. Finally, students sought pictures that belied traditional mugshots to accompany their narratives. Through their research, they also discovered that the officers are rarely convicted or held accountable for these murders.

The posters that were the end product of this project became the centerpiece of the first Black Lives Matter at [district name] event in 2016 ("Black Lives Matter at School," n.d.). And now, years later, teachers at [the alternative school], educators, Black Student Union members, and school equity committees continue to struggle to acknowledge this testimony to the precarity of Black life in the United States. Five years after the project began, the sheer volume of student-created posters and signs serve as a painful and striking example of pervasive and systemic racial violence, as well as the challenges educators and their students face when they push for real democracy. Initials of Author 2

Most recently, the posters left the classroom and were carried by students and educators as we marched in grief and anger in response to George Floyd's and Breonna Taylor's brutal murders. In the aftermath of these heinous crimes, many school districts around the nation were pressured by their communities to remove the police presence from their hallways, where its detrimental impacts on students of color and poor students are clear. When our local teacher unions joined the call to remove school resource officers (SROs; uniformed police officers) from schools, we contributed to

their efforts. As practitioner-scholars, we provided research documenting the damages to students of color around the state and the United States. We engaged in direct advocacy, and testified to our local school board. As mothers we face no sanctions from the district for speaking our minds. We attended state department of education hearings, at times when classroom teachers are not able to travel an hour to the state capital on a weekday to share their experiences and points of view. Author 1 reflects on her privilege in raising her voice as a dominant-culture parent:

Author 1: From my position as a mother, as a White cis woman, over-educated (maybe) in the world of education, and an experienced teacher and school counselor, I am able to approach my relationship with our local board of education differently than some of my fellow activists. By virtue of my privileged identities I am seen differently at protests and at meetings. Even when the board doesn't like what I am saying (which is almost always) they cannot use race or class stereotypes (angry Black woman; uneducated immigrant) to discredit me. When I approach the board I am not nervous, I am angry. But this was not always the case. The first time I was nervous. They sit up on a stage that defines the front of the room, with everyone else in rows facing them, a format strangely reminiscent of a teacher-centered hierarchical classroom. They smile down but the smiles seem almost like sneers. You have to walk quickly up to the table where a microphone is set up, then speak to them for 3 minutes as they literally look down on you. If this situation feels intimidating to me, I imagine the entire board meeting feels unsafe for most parents. I have heard from students who testified in spite of their feeling intimidated. We do our best to help our school district do better, but when it comes right down to it, the board, and the central office administrative folks are very good at absorbing criticism and not changing at all.

All of the usual dynamics were in play when in June 2019 the board voted to create its own school district "law enforcement agency" at the suggestion of the administrator in charge of school safety. The change was presented to the board and the public as an administrative convenience and time saving measure—as a law enforcement agency, the district could conduct its own background checks on teachers, student teachers, volunteers, and so on. It quickly became clear that the "unintended consequences" impacted marginalized students, whose building monitors had become trusted mentors and support persons, would be made to take new training and to wear uniforms instead of their own clothing (clothing which indicated their pride in their Indigenous and Black identities and helped them relate to students). Even while hearing students' passionate pleas to not take this step, even after myself and other practitioners and practitioner-scholars pointed out that school policing disproportionately negatively impacts BIPOC students, the measure passed unanimously. It was the last

school board meeting of the year and there was not much opportunity to organize against the measure. It still stands.

In March 2020, under intense public pressure, the school board (with two new progressive members) voted to remove police officers (aka SROs) from schools, and suspended their contract as of the end of 2020. As we are writing this piece, the more conservative members of the board have taken over the process of creating a new "safety plan." One of our fellow activists calls the board's current activity a [district name] filibuster—meaning the board stalls interminably until pressure on them is relaxed, then they don't need to do anything. Between March and November 2020 there was no word on any new planning (partially due to the covid pandemic of course). And now a subcommittee of the board is asking the equity committee to convene in order to "advise" the board as to the makeup of another committee to advise the board committee on how to proceed. This looks remarkably similar to their actions (described above) in reaction to Black Lives Matter. They seem to be open to ideas and to changing, then backpedal and wait out the public pressure.

NAMING THE EXCLUSIONARY EXPERIENCES OF PRACTITIONERS IN SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH

With a large state institution of higher education in the center of this small city, it might be safe to imagine that generative and mutually beneficial relationships among the community, the public schools, and the university are the norm. Instead, in the COE we find that many relationships are far from respectful and reciprocal. Federally funded research centers pilot their educational products using our children as their "subjects." The race to prove "what works" and to "scale up" is not always beneficial for the community and the students, but it is *crucial* for many academics, whose livelihoods and reputations would evaporate if the system of schooling de-emphasized conformity and instead embraced the beauty and individuality of each student. Grant funding, especially from the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Science, can mean survival or extinction for the dozens of research centers within the college. Because the University of [State] has been starved of public funding for decades, and now finds itself beholden to rich and famous donors and astronomical annual tuition hikes for students, grant funding is incredibly important; our COE brings in more research dollars to the University than any of the other colleges, consistently winning this funding competition. In our capitalist competitive society, where making money is equated with success, this is perceived (or more accurately misconstrued and misunderstood) as

successful work on behalf of schools and students. If a product or program is deemed "successful" that usually means it has made it into the *What Works Clearinghouse* (Institute on Education Science, n.d.).

In this context, researchers feel an urgency to develop "data-driven interventions" that get funded and can be replicated and sold to schools. One intervention in particular [name removed for blind review] has been tested on our local children for years. It is considered one of the top "evidence based practices" in the nation. It is "scaled up" to almost 34,000 schools across the United States (Center on PBIS, 2021), and its creators are selling their "proven" approach for millions of dollars. It [name removed for review] has bulldozed its way through our local school districts, the state of [removed] and the nation. All along its journey, the voices of practitioners have been silenced or ignored in the face of this behemoth program. One scholar-practitioner-author, in a social situation with many other teachers and university researchers, expressed concern that [program] was a tool of control and compliance, but not helpful to engaged learning or long-term social emotional development. One of the program coordinators replied, "Well you're just doing it wrong then. We need fidelity to implementation." [Author 2] has extensive experience with (program) in her career:

Author Voice: While teaching sixth grade, I learned very quickly that young people often use their bodies to say what they need. Little Joey taught me this each time he would hide under the desk. Behavior is the language of those who don't have access to the words—and we know that the words all come through specific cultural contexts (Darder, 2012). But it was acceptance, love, and understanding that made Joey feel safe in my classroom. Not a "tracker" or a cookie or some prize at the end of the week. The university has widely peddled a behaviorist program that the local district has swallowed hook, line, and sinker and installed in almost every school in the district.

In successful ethnic studies classrooms, teachers "arm" our students with the lexicon of resistance in order to reframe the too-common narratives of failure to counterstories of resilience and transformation. But our district insists that we engage in token economies with even our most marginalized students. We received "training" on handing out cards for wanted behavior such as arriving on time, turning in assignments, and for being "caught" doing good deeds, such as sitting still. Students were expected to turn their tokens into the office for a drawing at a weekly assembly at the end of the week. Students would sheepishly turn in cards, if they did so at all. Many cards were found on the floors of classrooms and students were often caught avoiding or sneaking out of the assembly. Teachers, including myself, were admonished for not handing out a certain number of "heart cards" in a week. For a student community with

roots to violence and exploitation, this program seemed to alienate these students even further from trusting an educational system that had repeatedly harmed them. | DC

Concurrently, and along the same schooling-for-sameness mentality, the use of standardized tests in K–12 schools has expanded, along with the increasingly high stakes attached. The validity of these tests is in dispute, and the ethical considerations of using such a one-dimensional cookie cutter to sort and rank students, teachers, schools, and entire districts, are a matter of debate. Students, their families, and their communities have been called upon in the past 2 decades to push back the education industrial complex that profits from testing and curricula that ranks and sorts students into status quo economic structures. A strong "opt out movement" has spread across the country, with mixed reception and mixed results. As part of a community-based group of education activists, [name removed for blind review] I have put myself to work as a practitioner-scholar in support of this movement. When then secretary of education criticized those who would opt out as entitled parents who do not want to test because they are afraid they might learn that their child is not as smart as they thought (Taylor, 2016).

Author Voice: When NCLB came down in 2001, I [Author 1] was teaching at a K–5 school full of brilliant and glorious Black children, in Central Harlem, in New York City. As a mostly-optimistic and ever-hopeful person, I remember thinking, "If they do this they will have all the proof they need that my school, and my students, are starving for a real education." That was the stated goal, to use federally mandated and federally overseen mass testing to ensure that students who haven't been well-served; whose schools have not been well-funded, would get what they need and deserve. After all, this is a reauthorization of President Johnson's 1964 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, part of the "War on Poverty." Sadly, my belief that someone would finally do right by these kids seems in retrospect just ridiculous—after almost 50 years of post-Brown segregation, "What is going to change?" Separate is still unequal and everyone with any sense can see that.

My naïveté met its demise when the actual requirements of the law, and all of the restrictions on what and how to teach became clear, along with our realization of the sheer number of hours we would be spending on testing, test prep, learning about test administration. Things got worse and worse as recesses were cut short, "language arts" became "reading" (reading prompts to be better able to answer the multiple choice questions), and art and music became before-school or after-school "extracurriculars" as

the curriculum narrowed and teaching became driven by fear of the tests and their results.

When I came to [city, state] I found teachers who were instructed to not communicate with parents about the tests and their uses and validity, to say nothing of the opportunity to opt out; as employees of the neoliberal state, they were not allowed to criticize. I found myself, as a practitioner-scholar outside of the district, able to make contributions that I could not as a teacher and school counselor. I joined [organization], a grassroots group of bold teachers, former and retired teachers, and parents—as well as a few university professors, looked hard for "my people" around the community, and offered my services as a researcher, a social-media manager, letter writer, and speaker at school board meetings. I even ran for school board 2 years ago, as the "change candidate" (and did not win). My incumbent opponent took up my ideas for diversifying input by taking meetings to the people rather than hold them at "central" where the board members sit atop their dais looking down on us as we enact the role of supplicants, asking—sometimes begging—for what our children need. Though our local school board is populated by mostly well-meaning liberals (all White and upper- or upper-middle-class, and they profess to value community input, they routinely ignore public opinion and continue to act as the deliverers of state and federal mandates rather than education leaders. As we write this, all public input has been quashed by board meetings that take place on Zoom, where our voices are literally muted. || DC

These actions, among others, ensure that practitioner and practitioner-scholar knowledge is excluded from the discussions, and district administrators and the school board consistently underestimate, undermine, and completely ignore what teachers know and can offer. The department of the COE that trains and nurtures critical and politically aware teachers is consistently marginalized by the college in favor of departments that secure more outside funding as they "prove" or improve their behaviorist interventions. This neoliberal market approach to education is opposed to our professed value of public education as a public good, and is fundamentally undemocratic (Collins, 2009; Tuck, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2014).

PATHWAYS TO PRACTITIONER SCHOLARSHIP

Both authors began pursuit of doctoral degrees after long careers in public schools. We both consider our advanced degree as a tool in our quest for justice. One of us is pursuing a PhD with a dissertation focusing on teacher activism; the other recently received a DEd in educational leadership with a focus upon secondary ethnic studies implementation. Each of us is "playing

both ends against the middle" (as Author 1's father would call it), trying to use the tools of the master at the university to bring down the master's K–12 house (Lorde, 2007).

Author Voice: As an educator of color for over 20 years, I have my own experiences in schools, and my students also have trusted me with their stories of marginalization within a system that makes invisible and negates the narratives and realities of the poor, the Brown and Black, and the Other. My first position was at a wealthy, predominantly White high school, where I worked with students labeled "at-risk" for drop out. From the way staff treated me and through the eyes of my students, I learned quickly how the system operates to sort, rank, and push out the young human beings it professes to serve. Although my position was intended to help with student "retention," the very term trivializes the realities of the students who walked into my classroom (almost) every day. The school system places the burden of staying in school on the student rather than try to understand how the system itself shapes students' daily experiences. I was struggling in this setting, but of course my students were even worse off. The first year, I read the list of negative characteristics and warnings that came with them from their former 8th grade teachers. I never read that list again. I didn't have the language for unconscious bias yet, but I could see that my students felt its effects.

In the eyes of many in that school community we were the throwaways. Give the new teacher, the teacher of color, the "hardest to teach," students: the poorest, the darkest hued, the ones who don't matter. Put them in the classroom inconveniently located in the furthest reaches of a huge school, upstairs at the end of the hall, or in a room adjacent to the lunchroom. All of us were meant to fail. But what we did in that classroom was create a community in which students could "develop an ethnic identity that connects school learning with their ethnic self" (Sleeter, 2011, p. 9) based upon authentic caring (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette, & Marx, 2014). The students taught me what they needed, what they struggled with, and showed me their brilliance. As the most economically disadvantaged students in the school, they were assumed to embody all the accompanying pathologies that sustain "the reproduction of class formation" (Darder, 2012, p. 69), but I could see that the system was the problem, not the students.

Like many ethnic studies teachers, in my early years as an educator I was not aware that I was creating a democratic classroom, one that would now be called culturally relevant and culturally responsive (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). But I was keenly aware of the need for these students to "see themselves, their families, their communities, and their histories in the curriculum and practices of the classroom" (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014, p. 117) in order to make sense of their educational journeys. Unfortunately, many new teachers are given the hardest students;

but in this situation, at least I was free to create curricula, and I did so with the students. Because of my own experiences with racism, sexism, and classism growing up, I could more readily and personally connect to students' historical and "current racialized realities" (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014, p. 118).

In 2008, in response to concerns regarding the oft-cited "achievement gap" between Oregon's White students and its students of color, a team of educators of color, including myself and my twin sister, created the first ethnic studies classes in our local comprehensive high schools. I began teaching Courageous Conversations in 2012. This course was designed to "chip away at disparities, to improve difficult school relations, and to enhance student learning" (Pollock, 2004, p. 9) in short: to interrupt racial achievement patterns. The course was democratic, intentional, and bore many of the markings of effective ethnic studies curricula such as a critical race and critical pedagogical philosophy. Without being labeled as such, Courageous Conversations became the foundational ethnic studies program in this school district. Based upon the precept that the failures of Brown and Black students are (a) deeply embedded within racist structural educational practices, (b) exacerbated by teacher bias or lack of preparation, and (c) reinforced by silencing all students on topics of race and subjugation, Courageous Conversations continues to serve as a powerful intervention to address educational inequity locally (Pollock, 2004). In 2016, we (my twin sister and I) worked in partnership with the local community college to align our course with Ethnic Studies 101; students may now receive college credit for successful completion. Every term ends with student research projects that challenge real problems students face in their communities. They are, in fact, practicing democracy—by courageously confronting the injustices they see. This practice has often led students to challenge school policies such as dress-coding and punitive discipline, to protest at board meetings to speak for their educators whose jobs end up on the line for teaching while Black or for their activism, show up in courtrooms to hold government accountable for climate change, and to the streets to speak up for immigration rights, Black lives, and against the policing of our schools.

Since 1998, I have taught ethnic studies in our local school district in a comprehensive high school, two alternative programs, and even middle school where I quickly realized that even 11- and 12-year-olds hunger for conversations about race and identity that often do not happen at home. These classrooms have shown me the transformative power of authentically empowering students' experiences and cultural knowledge. Additionally, clashes with administration in support of such conversations and student empowerment led me also to understand that for teacher/activists like myself, deeper understandings of leadership, policy, and political will are necessary. In 2016, I began the doctoral program in the Department of Education, Methodology, and Leadership at the University of Oregon, and quickly decided that I wanted to focus my dissertation work on secondary ethnic studies courses. My dissertation is focused upon the hypothesis that ethnic studies curricula gives all students the tools with which to scaffold a healthy understanding of their racialized selves and one another, in order to deconstruct the hidden yet ubiquitous power and racial dynamics operating in our schools and country that maintain inequity.

At this point, I am not teaching in our local school district but continue to support ethnic studies educators and curricula, facilitate affinity groups for teacher candidates of color at the local university, and work for an Indigenous teacher education program within the larger university COE. | RD

Author 1 Voice: As a White female teacher I am, on the surface, like 86% of teachers in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Unlike many of my peers (Fasching-Varner & Mitchell, 2013) though, I have developed a strong anti-racist identity and recommit myself daily to the work of education liberation. This is not to say I always "get it right" but I do always try. In 2011, I began a new position, after 20 years in New York City elementary and middle schools, as a different kind of practitioner. Suddenly I was teaching undergraduate students—the ones who aspired to be teachers, social workers, psychologists, helpers and world-changers. As director of the COE's Service-Learning Program I refused to set my students up for technocracy, and asked them to think critically about where things like No Child Left Behind (NCLB), smarter balanced assessments, and the SATs come from.

I began my PhD program in 2015, to try and keep my job at the [university name removed]. The service-learning program I had started in 2011 was thriving and I and a couple of my mentors feared that if it grew into the university-wide service-learning program that I was working toward, central administration would no longer let me be the director with "just" my two masters' degrees and 20 years of experience. I felt this was a shallow reason to engage in doctoral work, and I suspected that it would not fuel me through 4 years of coursework and then dissertation writing. I knew needed to write about a topic that would really set a fire under me, and since I have worked in public schools in New York City and seen school segregation in practice, and since I personally know many White parents who express their love of diversity and integration in words, then perpetuate segregation and marginalization of children of color in their deeds, I knew my passion (anger) for unmasking that nonsense would be good

fuel for my engine, and could make a positive difference in the world. In my children's new schools in [town] I discovered well-to-do parents who would invest thousands of hours of work into a fundraising party at a golf club, then complain that part of the funds they raised would have to be shared with other schools, so I had found my dissertation research participants.

At some point in my first year of coursework, one of our faculty joked, "I thought getting a PhD would mean people would listen to me more, but it hasn't worked out that way. If I hadn't anything, I might get less respect now." To me, this was not funny in the least. The only reason I undertook this project was to get some kind of power I could use for good. Luckily, as a service-learning practitioner and community-engaged teacher I know that credibility is something granted by the community, not by the ivory tower. I changed my research project to more closely match my commitments to my work in my local [state name] community. Since my first days in Oregon I have been increasingly involved in community work, volunteering with my students, setting up service-learning experiences for them, and advocating, along with local groups, for local politicians and ballot measures. I still work with [organization] and many of my co-conspirators generously participated in my dissertation research (including Author 2!). | DC

CONCLUSION

There is no route to education justice without the contributions of teachers and other practitioners. When left to their own devices, policymakers, researchers, and politicians continue to come up with programs and interventions that only reify discrimination, segregation, and student compliance. Thus, they reinforce the status quo, or make situations in schools worse for already-marginalized students, their schools, teachers, and communities. *NCLB* (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002) was not designed to help marginalized students, it was designed to make money for test-makers and to ensure we raise generations of compliant workers and enthusiastic consumers, who know nothing of the practice of democracy.

We refuse to abandon the liberatory possibilities of our practitioner-scholar-activist-created mutually beneficial relationships. We also invoke Indigenous feminist ways of thinking and "doing activism" that allow for the practice of democracy in schools and classrooms (Falcón & Jacob, 2011; Jacob et al., 2020; Wells et al., 2010), which opens up new ways to imagine a future where everyone can thrive. We continue to be a "thorn in the side"

of our local officials to the best of our abilities, and we have had successes as well as frustrating setbacks. Earlier this year we were part of a coalition of community members who demanded that our district remove police officers (SRO's) from our schools. While the outcome of this decision remains unclear, as the school board slowly forms a committee to talk about how to form a committee to talk about alternative visions for "school safety," educators and parents in our community struggle to have their voices included in the process. As practitioner-scholars we continue to insert ourselves in the middle of these struggles, lending our words and our academic labor to the cause of creating a better future for all our children and communities.

NOTES

1. Endless gratitude to Cheryl Matias for conceptualization of the motherscholar, to identify those of us for whom our work cannot be separated from our care for our children.
2. We do not condone the use of the label "at risk" for students, because of its frequent misuse to describe Black, Brown, and/or poor children, sometimes known as "urban students" in "inner city schools." However, it seems appropriate to apply to the district, which struggles to manage its limited funds, hires middle managers instead of educators at the central office, and whose board is dominated by local "leaders" who are attempting to translate their work on the city council or in the Mayor's office to the school board, or to *parley* their business success into the leadership of more than 1000 teachers and instructional assistants, 63 building administrators, and almost 17,000 children. (Oregon Department of Education, n.d.)
3. Thank you to the amazing and brilliant Michael Dumas for this phrase. Hopefully it catches on soon.
4. Huckaby and Crocker go on to point out several Black women who have been trailblazers in this work: Audre Lorde, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Barbara Jordan, Maya Angelou. To this list we would also add contemporary scholars and freedom dreamers Patricia Hill Collins, Nikole Hannah-Jones, Bettina Love, bell hooks, and Adrienne Marie Brown.

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