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INEQUITIES IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Work in Progress by

Francisco Rios, Dianne Bath,
Ann Foster, Margaret Maaka,
Nick Michelli, and Elizabeth Urban

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Abstract

Gross inequities are evident in this nation and in virtually every component of the nation's system of public education. Inequities fall unevenly on those who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or who are ethnic/linguistic/racial minorities. These inequities include differences in financial support, school re-segregation, and restricted opportunities to learn. The result is diminished educational progress and academic achievement. Addressing these issues requires a vision of schools as they might be and then a plan of action. While it won't be easy, guided by a vision of the possibilities and responsibilities of schools deeply rooted in democratic, social justice principles, educational renewal must take place to move from schooling as the dark to schooling as the light in students' lives.

Social Inequality, Social Justice, and the Pursuit of Democracy

Third grade teacher Madison Jane (2007) recalls her own life experiences during her elementary school years in her story "Where does compassion fit in?" She writes:

> I am nine years old. My family has been evicted from our apartment in a neighborhood, which was considered the "projects". We are now living in a single room hotel with two double beds and a small bathroom….Because we are now living in a town outside of my school's district, I am going to be forced to move to another school! I LOVE my 3rd grade teacher and have made many new friends this year. School is my safe and happy place. What am I going to do now?....There is no way that I am going to be able to go back to my third grade classroom and I am a scared, sad, and very stressed little girl who has enough change in her life already.

This story is a poignant reminder that, everyday, children throughout our nation come to schools from family, economic, and social conditions that profoundly impact their ability to learn. This is a growing concern. If we attend exclusively to the academic development of these children without consideration for their life conditions—unemployment, homelessness, parental incarceration, family drug abuse, poverty, racism, homophobia, etc.—we create an education system that is morally bankrupt and threatens the public democratic aims of our society.

A robust democracy requires significant and sustained attention to issues of both freedom and social responsibility. The latter, social responsibility includes "participating in the political process, righting the injustices that inevitably exist, eliminating poverty and homelessness, ensuring equal opportunity, and providing for all the education required to forge a democratic public" (Goodlad, 2008, p. 11). However, just the opposite seems to be occurring. Alan Wood (2008) writes, "For reasons that remain unclear, we seem to have lost the commitment to equality—a fundamental basis for any common standard for equity and justice—that for so long was one of the defining characteristics of American society" (p. 30), though it could be argued that we have never have had a full commitment to equality. We assert that recent national policies, most especially neo-liberalism—free, unrestrained, and unfettered capitalism or "capitalism with the gloves off" (Edelsky, 2006)—and global policies such as globalization, free-market reforms, war, etc., has exacerbated this loss of whatever level of commitment to equity and justice there has been.

The greatest threat to any democracy is that found in our often-callous disregard for the inequalities that exist in our society. The degree to which families and communities are in peril socially and economically equals the degree to which our democracy is in peril (Parker, 1996). Thus, we need to renew our democracy so that issues of equity and social justice become defining characteristics. And this renewal of our democracy must begin with renewal of schools where issues of equity and social justice must also become equally defining characteristics.

Defining terms and issues

For purposes of this paper, <u>equity</u> in education is defined as existing in a society, when its institutions (especially schools) and individuals therein (school professionals, caregivers, and community members), provide students what they need to be successful academically, linguistically, culturally, socially and psychologically. It differs from <u>equality</u> in education, which is defined as providing all individuals the same options irrespective of their needs. <u>Social justice,</u> a necessary adjunct to achieving equity, is defined as a nondiscriminatory and non-repressive approach to institutional policies and practices allowing all to imagine and achieve life's possibilities. It requires "a) attention to understanding the social forces and institutions that support inequity in social systems as well as the interpersonal behaviors, individual attitudes, or beliefs that reflect and also help to perpetuate unequal social

relationships; b) acknowledgement of the inter-relatedness of phenomena and thereby employ multiple lenses including historical, political, cultural, economic, legal, etc.; and c) value and affirmation of multiple perspectives and points of view" (Social Justice Research Center, 2008).

Centering equity and social justice as primary purposes in schools is a fundamentally different answer to the question "Why do we educate in a democracy" than the way many have answered the question historically and contemporarily. Whereas a central aim in the advent of the common school was to be "the great equalizer" (as described—in limited ways—by Horace Mann), the reality has been that schools have mostly served to support and sustain the status quo, reproducing in schools the very inequalities evident in the broader society. Jean Anyon's classic study (1981), for example, showed how schools in poor, working class communities emphasized obedience and skill development preparing youth for careers as workers while schools in wealthy, managerial class communities emphasized problem-solving and decision-making preparing youth white collar careers. A southern steel producer provided an example of this as he explained to an audience in Little Rock why he did not want the children of his workers to receive more than a high school education and thus think they were "too good" to remain in his factories (Clark, 2005, pp. 255-256). Social reproduction also happens along gender lines (see, Weiler, 1988 for evidence on how schools promote gender social reproduction). Unfortunately, all too often, we see these very same approaches being used as schools failing to meet state and federal goals for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) on tests are forced to adopt scripted curricula and "test-driven" instruction while those that meet this standard are free to pursue creative, critical approaches to learning. The schools which fail to meet AYP are largely in poor, urban, ethnically and linguistically diverse communities and are thus confronted with these more compliant, rote-memory, skill-oriented approaches to schooling. Issues of social justice and equity as we have defined them are not evident in such approaches and, as we noted, have not been central to American public education historically.

The flawed No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), passed with bipartisan support and implemented by the Bush administration, attempted to craft an education system that would ensure America's competitive edge within the international arena by widening opportunities for privatization of schooling. Underlying provisions of this legislation was an ideology of education as an individual right within an economic market and, concomitantly, an ideological shift away from education as a public good within a civic society (Weiner, 2000). As Bisson (2009) suggests, these two—schooling as an individual right and as a public good—are both essential:

American society recognizes to a certain extent that the education of its youth is a public good and a natural right for all citizens. The quality of life in any society correlates to its literacy rate. A society in which a large percentage of the population is illiterate will experience tyrannical forms of government with low levels of democratic participation. In addition to this, the strength of the economy is dependent upon the continuous production of citizens that possess marketable skills. These two challenges create a problem for public schooling because they require that students attain the skills necessary for civic participation as well as individual advancement. (p. 1)

Under NCLB's reforms, which privilege the individual and the economic, we seem to no longer "share a common public democratic mission for our schools" (Alhadeff & Goodlad, 2008, p. 7).

Consider the following example of the ignoring of democratic principles that should guide schools. A group wishing to start a charter school submitted a proposal to a school district. The committee proposed to require numerous hours of parental involvement for the child to be able to attend. The proposal had no provision for transportation, no provision for school lunch, and did not plan to serve special needs children. The school was to be located in a community that had a 50 percent diverse population of non-white. The local school board did not approve the charter proposal believing it failed to serve the interests of the community. The charter school committee appealed to the state department of

education. Both the school district and the charter proposal committee members were given an opportunity to speak. The school system superintendent expressed concern about the proposal's design which would eliminate a lot of the low socio-economic students in the community who would not have parents who could commit to the volunteer hours, provide transportation, or have resources to provide lunch. He pointed out that not serving special needs students would be a violation of civil rights. The state board had few questions and little discussion. Ignoring the concerns raised, the board members unanimously approved the charter proposal. This board of education and the state had a political goal of creating charter schools and this was to be the first one. The school began with an almost total white, upper socioeconomic population and equity was not present.

This shift away from schooling as both public and for the public good within a civic society is disturbing since public schools are the perfect social institutions where an "apprenticeship in democracy" can take place (Nieto, 2007). As students, their caregivers, educators, and community representatives enact the role of "stewards" of our schools (and, by extension, our society), they come to recognize both the personal and social growth concerns of our youth and the communities where they call home. That is, our schools can foster a more socially just society by way of preparing active, engaged, thoughtful and caring students as citizens in a democracy. In this way, we are preparing citizens for a particular kind of citizenship rooted in both critical thinking and active engagement in communities (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). The hope is that such students will then ask the tough questions (why do social injustices occur?) but also engage in productive behaviors to help resolve pressing social dilemmas, taking action while standing alongside those in communities ravaged by poverty, violence, family disruption, hopelessness, or socially destructive drug abusive behaviors to foster alternative ways of living—not out of altruism but out of civic attitude and social responsibility (Parker, 1996).

As suggested earlier, the inequities in societies are too often reflected in the local schools. That is because schools are nested within larger (local, state, and national) contexts. Thus, it should not surprise us to see how inequities (described below) play themselves out in real and tangible ways in schools. For Madison Jane, now herself a teacher, it plays out thusly:

> I teach at an elementary school where more than 80% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. Our student population is filled with many families who are not only living in poverty, but have been "stuck" in generational poverty for many years....My first days on the job, I walked through the school parking lot to find a spoon and a needle on the steps of the school. Sex, drugs, and violence are well known to my students and something that they are constantly dealing with.

Complicating the challenges we see, a dilemma facing educational professionals is that schools generally, as currently organized, cannot be described as very strong models of democracy. That is, how do schools which are currently undemocratic (in the main) hope to prepare the kind of engaged, active, democratic citizen needed for an individually and collectively healthy society when much of their current practice can be characterized as undemocratic? As Jane Roland Martin (2008) described schools,

> ...governing structures are hierarchical; rules are not always applied equally to children of different races, classes, genders, etc.; and many classroom practices deny children such fundamental democratic rights as freedom of speech and association. (p. 58)

Thus, according to Roland Martin, a precondition to promoting the kind of citizen committed to equity and justice as a social responsibility that we assert should be the goal is that schools will be required to undertake active and engaging renewal in service to a "deep democracy" (see Parker, 1996, for a description of deep democracy). We ask: How might schools renew themselves toward greater democratic, social justice, and equity purposes given the history and deeply entrenched pattern of

perpetuating educational inequity and the current political and ideological retreat from education as a public good?

Social Inequality in Schools

In the 75th Anniversary issue of the *Harvard Educational Review*, Sonia Nieto (2005) writes that the condition of inequity reaches far and wide across this nation. The history of education in the United States is one of betrayal and broken promises particularly concerning race, ethnicity, gender, class, and language differences. There is a widespread resistance to social change in general in the United States, and therefore, in the public schools; schools in the United States are among the most unequal in the industrialized world. Still, Nieto explains that in spite of this dishonorable state of affairs, schools remain the best hope for personal fulfillment and a better life for most populations.

With this dichotomy schools represent both the darkness and the promise of the light for children. The mandate to address these inequities in schools continues. Equally important is understanding that social and institutional structures, economic conditions and public schools are inextricably connected. The study of education in relation to social justice in our public schools is complex and multifaceted at its core, embedded in the greater context of this society. Education in a democracy involves attending to sociological, psychological, economic, and political dimensions with respect to their role in promoting (or undermining) justice and educational equity. The hierarchy of bureaucracy and the power of the status quo are such that, in our country, poor children and communities are treated differently compared to those children and communities from upper class backgrounds (Orfield, 2005). Social change and educational change, therefore, must go hand in hand.

We share a few examples from our own experiences:

Example 1:

In a well-respected high school, in the spring, I listened to colleague deliver the graduation address to four hundred seniors on their day of celebration. Upon entering the gymnasium that sun-filled May morning, the students appeared joyful with a sense of community and accomplishment. Shortly after the opening ceremonies, the honored teacher who was well known for his rigorous instruction to "gifted" students in advanced placement (A.P.) courses took the podium. As expected, his speech was eloquent and well-delivered. We did not know, however, that 90 percent of the audience would be excluded not only by his words but by way he directed his remarks primarily to his students, the young people his A.P. sections, mentioning by name those with whom he had worked, those who were smart, special and from whom great things were expected. How devastating this experience was for the "others." How apparent was the sorting and separating of students and how blatant was the celebration of education of some to lead and others to follow them. This teacher had clearly forgotten (or perhaps never was committed) to his service to a "deep democracy" (Parker, 1996). What had happened to this teacher's responsibility for promoting equity and social justice for all?

Example 2:

The following challenge to the faculty of a new junior high provides the second example and illustrates the paradox of the dark and the light in our current system. During a summer retreat prior to the school's opening, the principal told the faculty that he had recently hired a special education teacher. Also, he wanted the faculty to know that there would be a new special education student that he was pleased to welcome because he would bring a distinct perspective

to their school. The principal explained that no other junior high school principal had been willing to accept the student because he had caused trouble in several schools. The student had acquired a formidable reputation as a troublemaker so no one wanted to open the doors to possible danger to their students. The new principal, questioning conventional thinking, explained the opportunities he saw in welcoming this young boy as one student who could help the school define what they were to be and to become as a school and a community serving the needs of all children. This challenging story of paradox and questioning the status quo is an example of the light and the darkness of schooling and the possibility of change. It suggests that, while the pattern of social injustice is deeply entrenched, renewal toward greater democratic purposes can begin.

Example 3:

An elementary school's experiences provide another example of light and promise and a reminder that when school practitioners understand the larger purpose for public schools and genuinely respect their students good outcomes abound. At this elementary school in a poverty-impacted urban center, family and caregivers are present in and around the school throughout the day. As one community member noted, the school is family and everyone is welcomed and respected. It is no surprise given this basic premise that the school's state mandated test results are high. And, delving deeper into the school culture, it is noteworthy that several structures co-exist with support and respect. There is a dual language program, a vertical team, and a more traditional grade grouping structure. Students and teachers have options and are encouraged to engage in the program that best suits their needs and strengths and to suggest additional options. And, as teachers <u>and</u> *students enjoy choice and have voice in the school on many levels, engagement is high. Some excerpts from the school's mission statement illustrate the direction that schools serving communities with students from low income backgrounds, who are also ethnic and language minorities can take rather than subscribing to scripted and constrained curricula:*

> *At our school we strive to create an academic environment that is both enjoyable and rigorous, one that gives students various opportunities to display and fortify their talents through authentic work. We believe that these methods and activities will invite children to engage in inquiry and decision making as they experience their world and build relationships in it.*

Still, in direct opposition to what is needed to advance social change, too often the children of the poor and ethnic minorities in the United States are the ones for whom education is doomed (Anyon, 2005). Evidence of this difference in treatment of these children is seen in the presence of a growing achievement gap for Latinos and African Americans when compared to their White counterparts. The increasing gap is an undeniable indictment of our society's failure made manifest in schooling. For example, by the measure used by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, the graduation rate for African Americans and Latinos in New York is between 35 percent and 37 percent. More than 60 percent of these students do not graduate and thus face long-term consequences including a higher likelihood of incarceration, poor wages and poor health.

With the hope of making sense of this national problem and its denial, in this paper we examine institutional constraints, curriculum and instruction practices, and teacher professionalization in order to name the concerns and identify parts of the whole to see their influence and acknowledge their interdependence.

Institutional Constraints

What is the story behind this failure? What are the structural conditions accompanying our failure to nurture and educate all children? To begin, there is a nation-wide pattern of re-segregation that continues to be a challenge for schools and more importantly for students. Robert Kennedy called segregation the greatest stain on our nation's honor. Jonathan Kozol named re-segregation the *Shame of a Nation* (2005)
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More specifically, as Kozol (2005) reports, segregation has significantly increased over the fifty plus years since the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that racial segregation is illegal. American schools are once again caught in the devastating cycle of segregation, deeply institutionalized and yet generally denied. The proportion of black students in majority white schools has decreased to a level lower than any time since 1968, the same year that Robert Kennedy identified this stain on our nation's history. Kozol notes one poignant difference: today schools and the media refuse to use the word "segregated." They refuse to name the trend, which results in denial and increases the insidious power behind it. Disturbingly, since the Brown case the courts have become reluctant to require racial balance.

Kozol further uncovered the truth that in many cities, wealthier families were continuing to move to suburbs increasing the trend of re-segregation rooted as much in life choices around where they want to live as it is in outright racism. Kozol writes the story of a school district in New York where it was proposed that a small school of poor mostly minority students would be closed and those students would attend surrounding schools in a district of mostly white students. The proposal met with anger and finally rejection by the wealthier community. Kozol concluded this story as a missed opportunity to end the educational apartheid of a small community of ethnic minority children.

In a major east coast city, the school district created magnet schools in an attempt to stench the flight to the suburbs. As a result the *left-over students* attended school in decrepit structures, with limited curricula, and school days that were shortened to end before lunch so there would be no fights in the cafeteria. A superintendent was dismissed for daring to name the problem as he told the city council and the state legislature that their lack of support indicated they just did not care about the lives of the African American and Hispanic students who populated the school system. Ignoring his recommendations, the state chose to "take over" the system and encouraged the awarding of lucrative schooling contracts to private firms that have made little difference for the students. Meanwhile, public school enrollment continues to be more segregated.

Funding for public schools is shamefully inequitable (Kozol, 2005). The system of property tax support for education and the amounts of money spent, Kozol explains with honesty and outrage, are clearly inequitable. In New York City, in 2003, the expenditure per child was $11,627 while in surrounding wealthy suburbs generally $20,000 or more was spent on each child. Similar discrepancies exist in the city described in the preceding paragraph and elsewhere. The situation is compounded when one considers the relative needs of students. "Equity, after all, does not simply mean equal funding" (Kozol, 1992, p. 54). The needs of children who live in poverty and for ethnic minorities are often larger and must be attended to if they are to have access to a meaningful, responsive education.

In describing these re-segregated, lower-funded schools, Kozol details the unhealthy conditions, the lack of equipment and the extraordinary state of disrepair. After an observation of a computer class in one such school, Kozol reports that the students sat and talked about what they would be doing if they had computers. Along with the lack of computers, Kozol observed schools from New York to California with no textbooks, no chairs, no desks, not enough room nor the classes necessary to prepare students to go to college.

Schools as public institutions that should be serving those who have historically been marginalized most often become disconnected from these families and these local communities. The schools and educators within these schools seem unable or unwilling to make the necessary connection to caregivers and local community members. Parents who may have never learned to read or for whom English is another language in the traditional structures that define our schools most often have no voice, therefore are not listened but rather are marginalized. Education of the parents to understand the goals of the school is neither seldom undertaken (Kozol, 2005) nor do schools commonly seek to understand the educational goals of their students' parents, families, and communities.

A further consequence is that too often the children themselves feel disconnected from the schools and the teachers. They report that their teachers don't know who they are. Teachers are perceived as culturally insensitive. Contributing to the entrenched patterns that separate schools and communities defined by poverty is the difference between the backgrounds of teachers and that of the students in the schools described above. Most teachers come from the majority culture and have little or no background in or understanding of the local cultural context of these communities. The chasm between teacher and student, between school and community, between the have's and the have not's continues to deepen ever larger. The impact is destructive to the students, their communities and our nation's democracy.

This kind of uneven playing field, this tragic injustice to our children and the ongoing inequity to certain populations, begins before students even enter the public school classrooms. The systemic unfairness of our culture begins when children are two and three years old. Thus begins the "educational deficit" (Kozol, 2005). Many children of underserved minority populations are not able to attend pre-school of any kind. Federal funding for programs like Head Start is insufficient and as a result almost half of those children who are eligible are, in reality, turned away and doors are closed to them. Their wealthier counterparts frequently experience two years or more of pre-kindergarten nurture and learning.

The inequity continues throughout the public school experience for these children to the point where elementary school children begin to understand the differences in their life and that of other, wealthier children. This harsh reality actually led some conservative black authors to advance the notion that poor children and particularly black children should not be allowed to learn of the lives of the rich and, in fact, that separate schools might be kinder, more beneficial (Kozol, 1992). The fear for some was if the poor had this information they would develop the attitude of "victim," and that this kind of thinking would undermine actual opportunity and damage self-esteem. This belies the fact that most students in the poorest of schools by adolescence are painfully aware of the difference. "It is a waste of time to worry whether we should tell them something they could tell us. About injustice, most poor children in America cannot be fooled" (Kozol, 1992, p. 57).

Curriculum and Instruction Practices

As these students grow and progress through the education system there is increasing evidence of the inequity in their world. A painful reminder of injustice is the inappropriate use of the words "grow and progress" to describe this journey for marginalized students. Many of the children experience neither growth nor progress. Rather, schooling for them becomes a passive act of just "showing up," wishing that they were not there, and sometimes choosing to disappear either figuratively or literally. There are many reasons for this state of dissatisfaction and disengagement including an irrelevant curriculum built for members of the dominant culture as well as poor instruction effected by pressures of high stakes testing with the concomitant consequence of unfair tracking or inappropriate placement of students in special education classes.

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the standards-based reform effort in education has grown and attracted support. In many states, high stakes testing is the sole reality of this reform movement. All too often, the scores on these tests have been connected to the sorting of students resulting

in re-segregation, grade promotion or retention. These tests have driven curricular decisions that focus on "teaching to the test." And these tests have real, direct influence on students (whether they can graduate) and staff (salaries and tenure) (Orfield & Wald, 2001). In their article, "High Stakes Testing" (2001, p. 2), the authors reported the following findings concerning this form of testing:

> High stakes tests attached to graduation lead to increased dropout rates, particularly for poor and minority students. Using tests to retain students in the same grade increases likelihood that the retained student will eventually dropout. The practice of retaining students produces no educational benefits, increases classroom management problems and is tremendously expensive. High stakes tests dilute the curriculum. Teaching to the test is far more likely to dominate instruction in high poverty schools. Many states are using tests in ways that directly contradict the recommendations of experts and the federal government, for example, to make tracking decisions.

How do these findings then play out in the reality of school for the poor and minority students? In the arena of curriculum and instruction, the influence is overwhelming. As teachers are forced to focus on the high stakes tests, they forego the relationship between the learner and the content. Teaching becomes simply transmission of knowledge rather than construction of knowledge by the students (Ford, 1999). As Ford describes it:

> Democratic education assumes that all individuals are diverse and learn best when topics, issues, material, and methods grow out of student concerns, and that in order for education to serve society's needs, it must first meet the needs of the individual. Educators, however, have responded with product-oriented, object-centered curricula that fail to meet the needs of diverse learners. (p. 5)

Besides limiting curriculum and instruction to the act of depositing facts and names of objects into the minds of students, which in itself dehumanizes the learning process and alienates the students, an additional consequence is the curricular content. Focusing on facts and artifacts of the dominant culture, rather than on allowing children to relate to one another and develop understanding among cultures, in reality, makes the subjects themselves objects of study (Ford, 1999). In this process, and as a result of a diluted or superficial curriculum, stereotypes are further developed, no human understanding is achieved, cultural differences remain devalued, and separation and discrimination persist.

For example, American education often refuses to recognize African American children, as having a distinct culture. African Americans are recognized as a distinct race; however, the values of their culture are generally dismissed both in curriculum and instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1994). "It is presumed that African American children are exactly like white children but just need a little extra help" (p. 9). This vision of other cultures devalues all cultures other than the dominant culture, and asks children to accept their own diminishment in order to succeed in American schools.

There is evidence to suggest more generally that when African American students attempt to achieve in school they do so at a psychic cost. Somehow many have come to equate exemplary performance in school with a loss of their African-American identity (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p.11). The election of an African American as President may reduce these feelings but, in and of itself, is unlikely to be sufficient to undue the effects of many years of prejudice.

Students of minority cultures, like any student who feels devalued, may then make a conscious decision not to do well in school. The systemic effect of discrimination and oppression for students from the non-dominant culture force the children to purposely learn how to reject the system and consciously

decide not to learn. These devalued students often do not drop out of school; they are pushed out, as they choose to honor their identities and maintain their integrity by rejecting the discriminating institution. Hegemonic, oppressive, unfair, and cruel is the treatment of a great number of the most vulnerable children in our public schools.

Teacher Professionalization

A final contributor to schooling's systemic inequity is the maldistribution of experienced and excellent teachers. Urban and rural schools often have the least prepared teachers who are least expert in their content fields and do not understand pedagogy or the children they serve. The segregated schools serving poor and ethnic minority students more often see staff turnover and the departure of high-quality and experienced teachers.

Eighty-five percent of American teachers are White, and we know from a recent survey that they systematically leave schools undergoing re-segregation when they get enough seniority to do so (Orfield, 2008, p. 2). Often the least experienced teachers with inadequate training and lack of professional support are those who are working in the most challenging situations. Add to this the challenges described above relative to institutional constraints and a constricted curriculum and instruction and it is not surprising that these teachers have low morale although they likely began with passion and hope. Despite her own life circumstances and the belief that teachers can make a difference, Madison Jane realizes that she is constrained, too constrained, in how she can respond. She writes:

> …everyday I am faced with the sad fact that due to the external mandates and requirements of me as an educator, the emotional support that I intend to provide my students has been pushed aside. Instead of teaching the whole child, I am now concentrating on spitting facts at them and asking them to demonstrate their knowledge so that we can finish our curriculum and perform well on the district assessments. My relationships with the students have almost disappeared and due to stress, my teaching practices have become unknown to me.

In the midst of such external forces as district mandates, scripted curricula, and standard assessments, we ask: where is the child? Where is the teacher? Where are the heart and soul of education? We feel the impact of the devaluing and eventual loss of the individuals, the unique persons who are meant to be the partners in the human experience of teaching and learning (Freire, 1970).

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) asks us to look more closely to see this reality and the hypocrisy of our democracy in light of the tragic events of Hurricane Katrina:

> The desperately poor who emerged across our media or were perhaps "washed up" after Katrina represent an entirely new magnitude of poverty to which too many had become insensitive and unaware. Katrina's gift was its in-your-face confrontation of how we are going to define the public and its interests. (p. 2)

Forging a Vision—Ideals and Possibilities

Our vision holds that public education must embrace action that renews democracy as one of its central goals. Access, excellence, equity, and social justice characterize public education in a democracy so that all children experience genuine success. It requires that teachers understand their content, pedagogies, and the children they teach. It requires genuine connections among the school, home, and community. It requires continual renewal by involving schools, colleges and universities, and members of

the community. As a result, students will be well prepared to assume their role as educated, critical participants in a democracy and recognize their rights and responsibilities within a cosmopolitan society and interdependent world.

The vision comes with a clear, uncompromising focus on the need to assure the success of populations historically disenfranchised. This means discarding deficiency ideologies, which foster educational inequities—all too common in school and university goals, strategies, curriculum, and pedagogy—and moving toward asset-oriented, strength-founded ideologies that are culturally and linguistically responsive. Realizing this vision means that schools as institutions can and will be structured, develop policies, and enact practices in pursuit of equity. The following questions can serve both as a measure and a guide for school renewal directed at promoting educational equity:

- What does schooling "look like"? This includes the physical surround and the subtle surround of policy and practice. If one were to walk through the school, how would one describe the school visuals? How are students grouped socially and academically? What is the content and tone of conversations? What is rewarded? How are the strengths of students acknowledged?

- Whose interests are being served? The regularities of school (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley & Goodlad, 2004) too often revolve around the needs of adults, convenience, and order. How are groups of students organized and categorized (i.e. by age-levels called grades,)? How are decisions made, and by whom, for the groups affected by those decisions? What accommodations are made for individual differences?

- How do we foster an environment of professional collaboration for all adults that interact with students? How are renewal, professional growth, and the opportunity to mitigate professional isolation addressed? How do we assure that teachers and university partners operate as a group of professionals that support and challenge each other? How are parents, caregivers, and other family members engaged with school professionals for collaborative and interactive support?

- How do we reprofessionalize the profession? What does this look like? Are all educators (K-20) stewards of the profession, taking an active role in local improvements and advancing the profession? To what extent is teacher education embedding dispositions of inquiry and life-long professional development in beginning teachers?

As we examine our schools and the preparation of teachers against the above questions, student wellbeing is the compass. That is, all actions are aimed at promoting healthy social, emotional, and physical environments, quality academic options, relevant and challenging curriculum, high expectations *and* the means to support such. Students are full participants in their schooling experience. Engagement with communities is authentic and embedded in daily practice, curriculum, and experiences for future teachers. These complex and interacting efforts are focused on expanding possibilities for all learners. Madison Jane focused on one particular student's wellbeing as a way to break from the sense of hopelessness she had been feeling:

> I decided to practice what I preached and really get to know this student and invest myself in showing him how much I cared….I tried to understand why he was doing these things and help him come up with some more appropriate choices for next time….He needed to have someone care, someone to listen, someone who believed in him. I took the time that year to talk with him and really get to know him as a whole person.

All students in schools need to have an adult who knows them in this way.

While we have not achieved what needs to be achieved, we do have a history of recognizing social inequities and demonstrating the political will to make institutional changes in schools. The civil rights movement provides an example of national recognition that public schools, by definition, have responsibility for quality education for all students but that schools as structured were failing in this obligation. While laws called for the desegregation of schools, it was the courage of individual students, families, community activists, and some educators that set policy changes in motion.

Unfortunately, the lack of significant and sustained change in pursuit of equity is reflected in entrenched school practices that too often address surface or immediate issues, such as student state assessment performance, that tweak the current structure. Instead schools must aim for second order change—change that question and re-conceptualizes the very foundation of our education institutional structures (Heckman & Mantle-Bromley, 2004).

We believe that schools can, and indeed must, make the institutional changes required to provide all students with a quality schooling experience, one that equips them with positive social and high academic skills that endure beyond the confines of the school. Schools can provide successful experiences with the larger surround by engaging students as contributors and leaders. Students' backgrounds and cultural strengths can be integrated into the teaching and learning sequence. And schools can advance our democracy by preparing the next generation to have and use attained skills, dispositions, and experiences that promote the public good. Schools and the programs that prepare teachers for such schools must focus on the ideologies and institutional structures that will best help each student acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of a fully functioning participant in a democratic society.

Our hope—our commitment is to renewing structures (schools and universities) that in turn renew the individuals who do this important work. We envision educators that experience and are motivated by the joy of personal satisfaction that comes from making a difference in students' lives. Madison Jane experienced such a moment of satisfaction:

> …on the very last day of school, I found this student in the back of the room with his head down….I saw that he had been crying….he looked me in the eyes and told me that he did not want to leave me. My tough, can't be bothered by anything boy, had been touched and I truly feel that I had done a good job that year. As we cried together and hugged, I knew that I had finally obtained my goal.

Realizing the Vision: Actions and Movements

Advancing public education to serve our democracy as a whole and the individuals that comprise it requires mindful, purposeful action. The following examples describe actions that, one step at a time, lead to facing and removing deeply-rooted inequities that deny historically marginalized groups access to the promise of education and democracy.

First, a change in the culture that permits gross inequalities to continue must occur. Institutional structures continue to perpetuate social inequalities as long as the cultures of the U.S. in which inequitable ideologies and institutional structures are embedded continue unchallenged. Challenging ideologies and changing the culture of society is not easy, takes time, and requires deliberate and sustained action. It requires a collective will to do so; developing this disposition requires time and attention to the situation. But it is possible to make such changes. Consider the impact that the "Keep America Clean" campaign, the "buckle up" seat belt effort and, most recently, the "second hand smoke" concerns have had on shifting the culture of the nation.

Second, communities and institutions must select and elect leaders that understand their stewardship role in relation to the education system and, by extension, the nation's democracy. These include university and school faculty, administrators, school board members, and other policymakers that advocate for children and youths and for whom democracy, equity, and social justice are a core part of their being. This requires agreement on the bedrock expectations of social justice and an understanding of the role social justice plays in the education enterprise by groups within the system and throughout the community at-large.

Third, we must insure that educational professionals have political clarity regarding their commitment to and role in promoting education for democracy. By political clarity, we mean that they understand their obligation to advance opportunities for *all* students and have the skills and will to do so. This is learned behavior; it must be central to university teacher and administrator preparation programs. University faculties have a tremendous influence on the development of political clarity and future teachers' dispositions to understand their role in advancing the profession.

Fourth, scholars (university faculty but also school-based professionals engaged in professional inquiry) must produce research on schools related to what the best schools could be, the reality of schools as they are, and the gaps between the two with respect to promoting socially just and academically rigorous education. This must include real-world cases of success. They must prepare useful scholarship for other educators so that they too can advance the vision. Scholars must assist and inform members of the public—the community—of the importance of the vision. This research agenda will succeed only if there is support through faculty reward systems, cooperation from schools (as sites for and contributors to the research), conversations about findings, and widespread dissemination of results.

Finally, university teacher preparation programs must partner with schools to develop creative programs and engaged educational professionals who can translate the vision of educational equity and excellence into action. Via ongoing inquiry, renewal of teacher and administrator preparation programs and school professional development changes can be made to address the advancement for traditionally marginalized populations. These partnerships are especially critical for schools in communities traditionally underserved by the education system. Schools where current teachers, future teachers, and university partners learn together and collaborate to improve schooling for these students provide practical application to the vision of a socially just school experience for all. These schools must be allowed to operate as laboratories of innovation, using culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum, and being open to new ways of structuring the learning environment. School communities and their university partners must be renewing organizations, using inquiry to improve practice as an ongoing expectation of their work. In addition, an advocacy-orientation must be embedded in the work of all educators.

Key Preconditions

These actions assume that educators are valued as thoughtful, reflective, principled, creative, and responsive professionals committed to serving the needs of the children they serve, the schools where they work, and the nation where they live. It requires a belief that teachers genuinely do not want to reproduce social inequalities; it requires a trust in teachers to pursue educational practices intended to foster equity and justice. We agree with Ilana Seidel Horn (2008):

> Although school as an institution is known for its role in social reproduction, I have yet to meet a teacher who entered the profession with the goal of contributing to the inequities of society. On the contrary, I meet many more idealists who, like me, believe in the promise of education and are eager to make a difference in children's lives. (p. 754)

There are at least three key conditions to supporting professionalism among the teachers and staff. The first condition is an atmosphere where the students, and the relationships they develop, are at the center of the work of the school. The processes used to keep the focus on the students are reflection and inquiry. This inquiry must move beyond the latest state level assessment results toward a broader conception of student learning. The inquiry on students' work creates a problem-solving approach rather than a fault-finding approach to teaching and learning. Teacher observations and discussions center on why students are (or are not) learning and performing at a high standard in a wide-ranging set of school expectations. These observations are recorded as evidence of what is working and what is not. It includes attention to the impact on learning of the use of time, space, materials, knowledge, skills, and/or other available human resources. Questions about student performance should be framed in a way that engages the teachers in the use of reflection and inquiry to inform future practice. Could the space be used differently? Is there enough time for the teaching and learning? Are there other materials that could be used? Is there another grouping scenario that would be more appropriate? Are there additional knowledge and skills needed by either the teachers or the students? Are there ways that teachers or support personnel could be utilized more effectively? This student- focused, inquiry-informed, problem-solving oriented precondition creates the right climate for advancing educator professionalism.

Protecting educator time to plan is a second pre-condition critical to professionalism. A prevailing belief must be held that educators are as excellent as they "plan" to be. There are multiple types of planning required in this condition. Daily, individual planning time must be provided in order for teachers to prepare and revise lessons as well as reflect on what *is* and *is not* happening with student learning. The second type is weekly planning where teams of teachers discuss current learning for current students considering high standards and how to teach to them and planning lessons together to capitalize on the strengths of each team member. Such teams share and analyze the results of students' performances and, when such performance is unacceptable, engage together in seeking answers to questions and solutions to problems. The third type of planning assures there is vertical alignment of the curriculum. This creates transparent understanding of what students should know and be able to do as they progress through the system. The fourth type is school-wide planning where time is provided to analyze data collected, including data from high stakes tests, as well as to discuss the procedural practices of the school. Preferably this is done in a low stress, problem-solving atmosphere where there is time for reflective work. Ultimately, the school is the critical unit of change and its renewal must be the object of continuing attention.

The third essential pre-condition is that the school's leadership (administrators and school board members most especially) understands that teaching and learning is a deeply human activity. Thus, teachers—as well as the students, staff, and community—are the greatest resources to be leveraged. Valuing teachers and the human capital they bring, combined with the use of systematic inquiry and time for planning, has the potential for the greatest positive effect on individual teacher's learning, on collegial learning, and ultimately on students' learning. The leadership understands this and sets about insuring that all pre-conditions are in place for professionalism to grow and student learning to prosper.

Questions to Move Forward

Where do we begin? Are there strategic priorities in deciding where to start? For us, it begins with each educator having political clarity, the courage to act, the desire to persist, and the compassion to touch the heart of others—especially those with whom they work and learn—in pursuit of equity in education. Grappling with the varied broad purposes of schooling, reflecting on one's individual schooling experiences as teacher and as student, and engaging in inquiry to pursue professional practices that reverse rather than sustain social inequality can provide productive, robust beliefs about teaching and learning upon which to schools may be renewed. Above all, schools need to provide a place where all children have access to knowledge, skills, and rich experiences that support them in becoming productive citizens. Educators must be unwavering in these beliefs.

How do we bring students' voices into this feedback loop of renewal and professional growth? When students are at the center of education, their voices are sought to provide critical insight into their individual learning and the conditions that support (or thwart) that learning. They become the critical key to their own learning. Students' struggles and successes are at the very heart of renewal and professional growth for educators.

How do we understand alternative worldviews in ways that enrich our conceptions of schooling? Our differences, this common and potentially affirming human reality, provide many different lenses with which to view our world and require us to understand the world of children who have been born into many different families and circumstances. Our differences are *not* grounds and justification for educational inequality. Valuing all the stakeholders and their voices is the only way successful public schools can be guaranteed.

How do we renew schools in ways likely to make a difference? Educational leadership and teacher preparation programs need to renew themselves toward providing educators prepared and committed to equity and social justice for all who enter the doors of public schools. Leadership programs may be in the greatest need for renewal since the educators they prepare have the greatest responsibility for organizational vision and its implementation. Leadership programs may benefit from striving for "Theory Y" leaders who value human capital and understand the productive effectiveness of shared decision making on management, teacher efficacy, student achievement, and community support (McGregor, 2005).

The teacher, Madison Jane, asks herself important questions of note:
I need to find a way to live out my hopes and dreams as a teacher while still meeting the expectations of my profession. Is it possible? I am not sure. Will I "burn out" as so many teachers before me have? I hope not. Will my students remember me the way I remember my third grade teacher? It is my dream and hope that they will.

Concluding Remarks

We acknowledge that U.S. society—with its long history of injustice—continues be defined by institutional structures, social practices and a cultural orientation that can be described as racist, sexist, and classist. Even as those overtly discriminatory structures, practices and orientations are swept away and replaced by a more progressive approach to addressing inequalities genuinely and productively, underlying them is a complex web of repressive ideologies (Weiner, 2000) that has been constructed and reinforced historically. Further, ample evidence exists that contemporarily these ideologies are used to justify and perpetuate social inequalities. Most frequently this includes blaming the poor and people of color for their own lack of social success. Thus, the alienation between the majority of teachers who are White and middle class, employing (usually unconsciously) these ideologies, and their students is perpetuated without interruption.

So the final set of questions we raise are these: What would have to happen to disrupt our culture that tacitly supports social inequalities? What role would schools play in this cultural shift? What would be the impact of a culture shift on the academic experiences of children who have been historically marginalized in schools? What impact would such action have on the nation as a whole and on our democracy "at-risk"?

This may seem to be a heavy burden to put on schools; it requires these institutions that form us as a public to engage in renewal towards different purposes about what it means to be educated. But schools as our primary social institutions must take the lead. Schools, with educators—university, school

faculty and administrators—as their primary agents must be on the frontline of these changes as it is local, small efforts, when part of a collective effort that can forge the type of changes we have described. To begin, all educators must be willing to enact a critical, democratic stance—one that works in concert with students to name oppression/social injustice and develop a sense of agency and hopefulness about society as it might be.

Our hope is centered in enacting change—change that reaches the deep democratic principles that, while unattained, serves as our ideal. Our hope is informed by the potential in candid and critical dialogue around real issues that acknowledge that many historical injustices have contributed to the current state of inequity. Our hope is advanced when we connect schooling experiences and student learning with engaged action on significant local problems. Our hope is sustained by a vision of the health of children, schools, communities, and the nation where social justice is the guiding light. We believe all of this is not only possible but also essential.

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