

Chapter 70

Sowing Seeds of Justice: Feminists' Reflections on Teaching for Social Justice in the Southwest

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ABSTRACT

Forming the basis for a provocative dialogue and written to illuminate teaching stories often pushed to the margins, this chapter provides a counter-narrative to the discourse surrounding leaky teacher-of-color pipelines and the national teacher crisis. Employing a critical race analytical lens, critical auto-ethnographic approach, and narrated through prose, five female educators committed to social justice share how they rely on unique and intersecting identities to sustain themselves in contested school spaces, while simultaneously exploring the cultural wealth they and their students bring into those spaces. Their collective stories reveal important lessons essential to our understanding of how to develop teachers for social justice. They also provide insight for those who teach in schools and classrooms meant to educate our most vulnerable and under-served students, and may answer the question, Why doesn't anyone want to teach anymore?

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INTRODUCTION

For critical scholars, teaching is an act of love: a radical love untapped when situated within school environments operationalizing policies like high stakes testing and no tolerance discipline¹. In these contexts, schools become contested spaces (Stovall, 2004), amplifying the challenge of teaching and rendering classrooms hostile environments antithetical to a critical scholar's anti-racist subjectivities. For those committed to justice, this means leveraging the best of their pedagogical stance becomes extremely difficult and teaching becomes a complex balancing act in which undesirable choices have to be made.

At a leadership retreat for teachers committed to social justice—the kind of social justice rooted in feminists' epistemologies viewing teaching as an act of love, education the practice of freedom, and learning an act of transgression against the boundaries of white privilege and oppression (hooks, 1994)—five female educators participated in discussions on what it means to teach and lead within schools and universities in the southwest. During reflections, one statement gave reason for pause, "...I didn't know what to do with what this school was calling teaching, but I knew I couldn't be a part of it any longer." Silence ensued. In that silence, it was as if the universe spoke: respite had finally come, and in each other, there was brave space to courageously examine, and boldly critique, the contested spaces they had all experienced. In that silence, the seeds of their collective journey towards teaching for social justice took root.

Employing a critical race analytical lens (Ladson-Billings, 1989), critical auto-ethnographic approach, and narrated through prose, five critical scholars share how they rely on unique and intersecting identities to sustain themselves in contested school spaces (Stovall, 2004), while simultaneously exploring the cultural wealth they and their students bring into those spaces.

Specifically, each woman's story foregrounds race, as intersected with gender and class, to reflectively examine the cultural, social, and political nature of teaching and learning (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Quicke, 2010). Narratives reveal how toxic classrooms and schools (Au, 2010) are cultivated. They also include detailed depictions of how culturally-centered knowledge and ways of being, gained and learned through lived experiences (Yosso, 2005), became a source of formative knowledge used to advocate for equity and justice for our nation's most vulnerable and underserved students (Santamaria, 2014). Finally, the unique strategies diverse teachers employ while teaching for social justice are highlighted, providing qualitative support for an emergent body of research provoking dialogue on the critical question: "Why do so few people want to teach anymore?" and offering a counter-narrative to deficit-laden answers blaming leaky teacher of color pipelines and the teacher shortage crisis on low teacher pay, cultural deficits, and claims of not enough people (of color) with a desire to enter the profession (Jackson and Kohli, 2016; Ingersoll and May, 2011). These stories suggest neo-liberal school reform policies and the marginalization of a discourse centered on equity, culturally relevant pedagogies, and the knowledges and lived experiences of diverse teachers committed to teaching for social justice may be the culprit (Kohli and Pizarro, 2016). Their critical narratives follow.

Malayka

We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes. —Ella Baker, "Ella's Song," Sweet Honey on the Rock

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