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Solidarity with the People: Organizing to Disrupt Teacher Alienation

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ABSTRACT

Although research on teacher alienation and isolation has demonstrated the importance of developing collegial relationships, mentoring, and induction programs, there is limited research examining the ways to support critical educators with combatting their feelings of alienation and isolation as it relates to the larger sociopolitical dynamics they must endure. Within teacher education and teacher in-service development we must engage in research and approaches to learning that acknowledge the possibilities and potential of teachers to lead their development toward becoming critical and culturally relevant practitioners. Using an internal colonial framework where schooling is articulated as an extension of the colonial project, this article explores the reflections of ten educators, from the elementary to high school level, as they worked to create spaces for learning within a teacher-led, community based organization. Drawing from participant observations and interviews with organization members, this article explores the ways participation in a community based organization supported teachers with enduring the social and psychological consequences of the alienation they experienced in their schools. The data explore the ways in which participants worked to develop teaching practices drawing from anti-colonial perspectives and through their process developed a sense of solidarity with other teachers, which is discussed as three sub-themes: shared beliefs, community, and commitment.

Struggling against alienation in schools

> Right now, my professional development consists of teaching me how to teach students to pass a test that feels completely irrelevant to my student's lived realities. During PD, I'm sitting in a room with my scores projected on a screen being compared to the scores of the other teachers in the room. For a lot of teachers, this creates a perverse culture of competition where they don't want to build with you because they feel like they're competing against you. (Ms. Gonzalez, interview)

In urban schools, teachers entering the profession today face a myriad of challenges, especially in states and districts that mandate institutional infrastructure such as induction programs and professional development. Teachers often find it challenging to manage their professional obligations while simultaneously addressing the needs of students in their classrooms. Decades of policies designed and enacted within the neoliberal paradigm have restructured teaching and learning in schools to center on high stakes accountability, which increases stress, anxiety, and general feelings of demoralization in teachers (Vallie & Buese, 2007). High stakes testing is but one example of state and federal policies that reify existing educational and social inequities. As such, teachers seeking to interrupt inequities through their teaching practice can feel alienated, isolated, and unsupported because they are directly challenging a

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system that is, by its very design, working to reproduce and predetermine failure in urban communities (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Through an internal colonialism framework, this article examines a teacher-activist organization of educators, students, and community members from South Central Los Angeles who came together and developed a community based organization called The People's Education Movement. Abbreviated as People's Ed, this multi-ethnic organization privileges the voices and experiences of marginalized peoples, such as People of Color, women, and LGBTQI, among other communities. Drawing from decolonial scholars (Fanon, 1963; Grande, 2004; Paperson, 2010; Tejeda & Espinoza, 2003), the organization worked to challenge colonialism, inside and outside the classroom, in order to better understand the nuances and intersectionalities of multiple forms of oppressions and their impact on schools. People's Ed worked to support its members in their understanding of the impacts of colonialism while working towards socially transformative solutions, like participating in local and national political campaigns, conducting community forums, and planning political education programs for teachers.

Given that research has pointed to the importance of critical and culturally relevant pedagogical practices to increase student engagement (Camangian, 2010; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Stovall, 2006), it is important to understand how to support teachers as they develop those practices while working in schools that are hyper-focused on standardized test achievement. People's Ed is at the center of this study because of its potential for creating spaces for critical teacher learning while also supporting teachers in developing a sense of solidarity with other critical educators.

The culture of isolation persistent in many schools is a historical development (see Little, 1999; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sarason, 1971) that mirrors the larger sociopolitical landscape, a society promoting a culture of separation from, rather than solidarity with, communities. Articulated as an extension of the colonial project, schools then can be understood to operate true to their design, alienating teachers from each other, their students, and their work. Without an analysis of the historical, social, and economic factors that shape their working conditions, teachers may feel a sense of apathy, defeat, and self-blame, or engage in a culture of blaming others for school failure (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Lipman, 2011).

This article outlines the context, tension, and importance of developing relationships as a form of resistance against a schooling system that works to alienate people from one another. Specifically, we examine what People's Ed refers to as "Teacher Survival Programs": teacher-led inquiry groups that provide support in developing decolonizing pedagogies; and healing and wellness structures to build support and address intra-group conflict within the organization. The research question that drove this article is:

> How does using a decolonial perspective to engage teachers in the process of understanding the material conditions of their personal and professional lives disrupt their feelings of alienation in schools?

The teachers' ideological development within People's Ed is important to note; however this piece focuses on the examination of the rich data regarding how important it was for teachers to be a part of this supportive community.

Alienation: The economical, political, cultural, and psychological consequences of colonialism

Scholars such as Memmi (1991) and Fanon (1963) examine the effects of colonialism and suggest that economic and cultural imperialism are at the foundation of an alienating process. Fanon (1963) points to the ways the project of colonialism works to control resources, land, and people. For this article, alienation is understood as the process taken to maintain power through normalizing a particular set of cultural beliefs and practices while simultaneously marginalizing groups that fall outside of the established norm. Thus, alienation is justified by a group's inability to fit within socially constructed notions of "normal." The insidious process of alienation is important to challenge because of the ways it breeds competition for scarce resources amongst marginalized groups, thus creating the material conditions for the systems of oppression that fracture modern life, like racism, sexism, and homophobia. Fanon (1963) further elaborates on the ways alienation, as a socially constructed phenomenon, is propped up directly, by institutions, policies, and laws, or indirectly, through dominant establishments like schools.

The ubiquitous nature of colonialism has worked to alienate colonized peoples from their histories, portraying stories about their past, present, and futures within the confines of a colonial narrative (Memmi, 1991). This attempt to rewrite the history of colonized peoples has worked to reproduce Eurocentric narratives that legitimize oppressive institutions such as schools. There has been much written on the ways schools alienate colonized peoples, encourage them to take on Eurocentric beliefs and practices, and induct them into linguistic and cultural beliefs and values (see Richardson & Nelson, 2007; Tarr, 2006; Valenzuela, 2010). Government schooling, a key to the project of establishing dominance and consent, is used to strip colonized peoples of their cultural identity, and works towards alienating groups from their indigenous knowledge, language, and customs as part of the project of empire building (Cajete, 1994).

The alienation of People of Color in the U.S. can be understood through a framework of internal colonialism, as a systematic process of underdevelopment created by their sociopolitical position under colonialism. In addition to the dispossession of colonized peoples globally (Quijano & Wallerstein, 1992), in which lands were stolen and inevitably drained of their resources and job opportunities, leading to migration, People of Color in the U.S. continue to endure internal colonialism within dispossessed communities, commonly referred to as "urban ghettos" (Blauner, 1969; Chavez, 2011; Gutierrez, 2004). Built upon dependency theory from Latin America (Bonilla & Girling, 1973; Caporaso, 1978), internal colonialism examines the evolution of foreign colonialism over satellite colonies into the contemporary domestic colonization of "ghettos" (Gutierrez, 2004). The theory compares dispossessed communities in the U.S. to underdeveloped countries, which as Cruse (1968) argued, are typified by "hunger, illiteracy, cultural starvation, and the psychological effects of being ruled over by others not of his kind" (as cited in Gutierrez, 2004, p. 286).

Central to internal colonialism is the way in which dispossessed communities are made dependent upon the metropole to meet its needs, due to its systematic underdevelopment (Caporaso, 1978; Chavez, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012). In addition to being governed by outsiders, businesses in internal colonies are owned by outsiders, with the income of residents drained out of the community, thus ensuring it be economically dependent on the larger society rather than self-sustaining (Chavez, 2011). Adding depth to the theory, Paperson (2010) names containment as a key feature of internal colonialism, evident in the policing of Black and Brown bodies as subjects rather than as citizens, and higher imprisonment rates despite similar crime rates (Alexander, 2010). Paperson (2010) also identifies internal colonies as zones of violence, apparent in the brutality and murder inflicted on bodies of Color at the hands of the police (Operation Ghetto Storm: 2012 Annual Report on the Extrajudicial Killings of 313 Black People by Police, Security Guards, and Vigilantes, 2013; Patterson, 1952).

Paperson (2010) goes on to highlight that internal colonies are imaginary spaces, spaces of excess and dislocation, where borders are fluid and in constant motion due to gentrification and migration out of the ghetto. Most importantly, Paperson (2010) stresses that the ghetto is Black— Black beyond phenotype— which is used to justify the governance, schooling, and policing of internal colonies. The tenets of internal colonialism also are evident in schools within dispossessed communities, with education within the colony created and administered by outsiders (Bitterman, Goldring, & Gray, 2013; Howard, 2010).

Despite attempts to provide local control through parent and teacher committees (Peña, 2000), schools are largely controlled vertically by outside forces (Maldonado-Torres, 2007), with little decision making power within schools. Standards and textbooks, which decide what students are required to learn, are created by those outside of the community (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Common Core Standards Development Work Group and Feedback Group Announced, 2009; Weissert, 2014), and are enforced by administration and taught by teachers who are, often times, also outsiders to the community (Bitterman, Goldring, & Gray, 2013; Howard, 2010).

In addition to Black and Brown students being heavily policed in their communities, they also endure the same policing on their school campus (Theriot, 2009; Ferris, 2014). Black and Brown students have been increasingly criminalized within the last two decades, on and off campus, with juvenile data showing youth of color arrested at rates double that of their White counterparts (Young People—Incarceration and Death at Home in the U.S., 2004), and the recent rise in zero tolerance policies have led to a dramatic increase in expulsions and arrests of Students of Color (Wilson, 2012). The increased criminalization of

minor offenses, such as the ticketing of tardy arrival to class (Blume, 2011), have criminalized a generation for offenses that have historically been committed by youth. The net widening and net deepening of discipline has increased the number of students being funneled out of schools and into the juvenile criminal justice system (Irby, 2014). Within an internal colonial state, institutions control, surveil, and subjugate people as a means to hold onto power; schools are one site where dominance is vigorously reinforced.

Because schools operate as institutions within the grasp of state controlled systems, we understand schools to be sites of social and cultural reproduction (Cajete, 1994; Grande, 2004; Spring, 2008) where teachers are instrumental in transmitting dominant discourses and asking students to follow suit, implicitly and explicitly. It is important, however, to note the possibilities and potential of individual and collective agency to work against reproducing systems of oppression (Dei, 2006).

Within schools today, teachers working against hegemonic discourses find themselves scrambling to subvert dominant ideologies by developing counter-hegemonic curricula that shed light on the lived realities and histories of their students. Teaching from a critical perspective can leave teachers to operate under great risk, up against policies that are working to reproduce the social and material conditions that exist in the community. The effort to develop counter-hegemonic curricula, at times, can leave teachers feeling alienated from the larger institution of schooling and the people in those institutions. Although some research on teacher alienation and isolation points to the importance of developing collegial relationships (Waddell, 2010), mentoring (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009), and induction programs (Ingersoll, 2012), there is limited research that examines the ways to support teachers in combatting their feelings of alienation and isolation as it relates to the larger sociopolitical dynamics they must endure. Therefore, we see it as important to examine the cultural practices that address the social and psychological needs inherent to battling the complex consequences of alienation in schools.

Solidarity: Developing kinship

In a time when teachers are pitted against each other to demonstrate effectiveness, as noted above by Ms. Gonzalez, we lay out a framework to make sense of the ways teachers come together and build relationships with each other. In order to make sense of the usefulness of a community based organization for teachers we put forth a framework of solidarity as a lens to discuss the ways participants worked to be in authentic kinship with one another. Specifically, we will draw from the way hooks (2000) discusses the notion of solidarity:

> Solidarity is not the same as support. To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood. Support can be occasional. It can be given and just as easily withdrawn. Solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment. (p. 67)

Solidarity, according to hooks (2000), is related to the varied ways people have relationships with others that are deepened because members of a community share certain beliefs, experiences, needs, and practices that are seen as integral to that community. These shared beliefs contribute to the way solidarity bonds the group. However, as hooks points out, authentic solidarity is grounded in a continued commitment to the group. Through continued commitment one begins to understand the connections of struggles, where one's liberation is deeply connected to the liberation of others. This notion of solidarity is an important analytic lens because it articulates a framework that challenges colonial systems that alienate people from one another. This lens of solidarity allows us to understand the ways teachers design professional development in a way that directly combats the feeling of isolation they experience at their schools.

Methods

Understanding that research has been used as a tool in colonial expansion, with outsiders entering indigenous spaces and analyzing happenings through a western lens, qualitative methods were employed in an

attempt to paint the findings from an insider perspective as a means of self-determination. Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) addresses the overlapping of outsider/insider research and clarifies that a researcher is both an insider and outsider even when employing insider research practices. She notes the importance of the insider creating relationships with community and sharing activities. For example, she writes of her research with a Maori organization of mothers in which she was a member prior to researching it, and engaged in their activities of fundraising and organizing. Similarly, prior to beginning research, we were active members of People's Ed and built relationships with members through fundraising activities and community forums, in addition to being vulnerable and sharing personal traumas within spaces such as the teacher inquiry groups, accountability circles, and healing activities.

To capture the nuanced perspective of teachers' dialogue and thinking, interviews (Seidman, 2012) were conducted over the course of the year with participants. The participants were a purposeful sampling (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) of ten educators that voluntarily attended the People's Ed meetings during the 2012–2013 school year and took active roles in the organization. Participants consisted of teachers that worked in elementary, high school, or university settings in South Los Angeles, taught a broad range of disciplines, and ranged from preservice to 13 years of experience. A more detailed description of participants is in the following section.

To provide a detailed account of the site, we relied on participant observation field notes as one of the primary research instruments for data collection. The field notes consisted of a description of the participants and the setting, from which we employed an inductive approach to discover important categories as we moved to code and analyze the information collected. Once all the data were collected, categories were created in order to organize the information based on common themes and uniqueness. Then the two steps for coding data that are identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used: unitizing and categorizing. From these smaller units of categories, data were combined based on common characteristics to describe a larger theme associated with the phenomenon. From these categories main codes were developed. An important part of the data analysis was member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which allowed participants the opportunity to provide input to the interpretation of information collected related to the research topic (Carspecken, 1996) that we may have overlooked or simply did not have the capacity to understand because of our positionalities in the setting. The voice of participants is seen as important; it can minimize issues of power between the researcher and participants and in the interpretation of information collected in the setting. This approach allowed the participants to challenge ideas of the researchers and allowed for the story of the participants to be told.

The researchers as people

As researchers we bring to this work a set of assumptions that are informed by our past experiences as former K-12 educators of color, community organizers, and university researchers. As engaged scholar-activists, we were part of a group of teachers, student, and members of the communities that worked to found People's Ed in 2012 and were active members when data for this article were collected. We do not claim to be objective bystanders in the setting, but instead took active roles in supporting and, in some cases, leading aspects of the work done in People's Ed. We have developed deep relationships with the people involved in this project and see that as a valuable asset that has allowed us to have a deeper understanding of what is happening within this teacher organization.

During the time of this study, Martinez was a doctoral student, ran an after school youth participatory action research program, and was member of the education working group that supported much of the work surrounding the teacher inquiry group. Valdez was a doctoral student and elementary teacher, while also serving on the leadership council as the community outreach coordinator, collaborating with local coalitions and organizations on events and actions. Cariaga was a high school English teacher at the time of the study, and served on the leadership Council as one of the heads of the Health and Wellness working group, facilitating various activities centered on self and collective care. As such, we have grounded our participation in different working groups, which allowed us an insider perspective into the struggles, intentions, and projects participants engaged in. Now that we also operate as representatives of the university, we acknowledge that we come to this work with a great deal of privilege and take every

moment possible to leverage that privilege and the resources it affords us to better serve the communities we are in struggle with.

The people

People's Ed was created out of a need to address pressing issues in a community where research shows there are low rates of high school completion; approximately 55% for Black and Latino students (Swanson, 2009). With many high schools in South Los Angeles with a student body that is 80–100% Black and Latina/o, this is of great concern. Along with this, over the last 40 years there has been a dramatic increase in the deindustrialization in South Los Angeles, which has led to economic disinvestment in the area (Davis, 2006). This is devastating to low-income communities because it leaves very little employment opportunities for low-skilled laborers. Lastly, the South Los Angeles area has some of the highest rates of crime and violence in Los Angeles County (Meza, 2011). It is the concentration of these factors, along with many others, that motivated teachers to come together to take collective action to address some of the social ills in the community.

Frustrated with the ways their schools did not attempt to address these issues, a group of approximately 15 people came together to create People's Ed in order to directly address the problems they face in their schools and communities. A goal of the organization was to interrogate the tension between the process of schooling and the role teachers play in reproducing the status quo. From the start, the group wanted to work toward understanding the ways teachers could create an education that is culturally responsive, liberatory, and humanizing from a decolonial perspective. People's Ed grew to be a multi-ethnic grassroots organization of approximately 40 educators spanning elementary- to university-level teaching, and ranging from preservice educators to teachers of 15 years. Members vary ethnically, with members of various Latino backgrounds, as well as Filipino, Indian, Palestinian, Japanese, Vietnamese, Black, and White members. During the 2012–2013 school year, general monthly meetings were held on Friday evenings in a classroom in South Central Los Angeles and consisted of political education and subcommittee breakouts. The organization also held special events, such as speaker series, film nights, teacher inquiry groups, and curriculum fairs, as well as informal and formal social gatherings for its members. Over the course of the year, the People's Ed events engaged hundreds of teachers from across Los Angeles County.

More concretely, drawing on the Black Panther party's notion of survival programs, People's Ed worked to support members in developing critical and culturally relevant teaching practices through offering a range of programming called "teacher survival programs." The teacher survival programs were designed not only to build a membership base, but also to create cultural practices that would sustain teachers as they engaged in their work with young people in Los Angeles schools.

Teacher survival programs

While many teachers are forced to attend professional development that is a rote and passive process (Kohli, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015), People's Ed members worked to create a space for learning, outside of the constraints of their PD, to develop decolonizing pedagogies. The teacher inquiry group came about because members expressed that the district and school-mandated professional development they received focused almost exclusively on standardized test scores and curricula that was removed from the daily realities of their students.

The inquiry group, a teacher-led space that was grounded in questions teachers had about developing their practice, grappled with the ways teachers from across academic disciplines can apply organizing principles and theories of decolonization while working in schools, where in many cases, dehumanizing practices are reproduced. To begin creating practical applications of decolonizing pedagogies, this teacher learning community met to read and discuss scholarly articles, and provided feedback to one another on curricula.

The People's Ed second area of work was driven by the Health and Wellness working group. The notion of wellness was identified as an integral part of the survival programs because teachers wanted to establish

a culture that actively worked to establish humanizing interactions with one another. Members created a Health and Wellness committee whose responsibilities were to hold accountability circles, facilitate community building, and teach members mindfulness practices. To inform their work, participants drew from transformative justice strategies (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005) to develop programs for teachers. As one way to address conflict within the organization, members developed accountability circles drawing from Chen, Dulani, and Piepzna-Samarasinha (2011), which moves away from placing blame or determining guilt or innocence. Ultimately, the goal of the accountability circle was to validate an experience with conflict and address the member's needs to transcend the conflict into healing.

Solidarity with the people: Shared beliefs, community, and commitment

As stated earlier, hooks (2000) situates the notion of solidarity in the ways people engage in relationships with each other. Along these lines, Ms. Cees, one of our participants, explained the importance of this notion of solidarity when operating in a context described as "illogical." She stated:

> I like to believe that we are supporting teachers to stay in the classroom because of the survival programs. We oftentimes teach in illogical environments so the organization gives us hope and a place to be in solidarity with each other.

Our analysis of the People's Ed teacher survival programs has led us to solidarity as the overarching finding, key to a discussion of how participants developed a sense of authentic kinship with one another. Across the data set, this notion of solidarity was evident when participants discussed the importance of developing a network of colleagues who held similar beliefs, cared for one another, and were committed to each other. For this study, solidarity is an important finding because it articulates the ways teachers challenged systems that worked to alienate people from one another. To further elaborate on this finding of solidarity, the most recurring themes from the data are discussed as three subthemes: shared beliefs, community, and commitment.

Shared beliefs

Because the teaching profession is upheld as apolitical within schools, there is a need for critical educators to have a system of support with others that share similar political and ideological beliefs. Similarly, Picower (2015) points out the importance of a politically like-minded group coming together in order to support the development of social justice educators. Along these lines, teachers in People's Ed continually expressed their gratitude for the spaces where they were encouraged to see their work as political. Many teachers in the inquiry group pointed to the ways collaboration with other like-minded educators supported them with becoming better at teaching. For example, Mr. Spirit, a Chicano seventh-year Ethnic Studies teacher, who presented his unit on Afro-Latinos to the inquiry group, expressed his gratitude for their support. Part of the feedback protocol established by this inquiry group was that presenters would share some of their takeaways from the group's feedback. As Mr. Spirit began to talk, he described feelings of agency and relief:

> I'm feeling a little emotional right now because earlier this week I sat in a room of teachers defending the importance of my Ethnic Studies classes; successfully, thank god! But now I'm in this room today with a whole group of people who are supporting and uplifting my work saying, "Hey, this is good! Let's make it better!" And, so it's really emotional as an educator to go through those two very different interactions … And so what you all have just done for me is created a vision on how to grow, and I value that you all have helped me to create this vision. We can't do this in isolation where it's only one person coming up with new and better ways of teaching … So I think if we push each other, that's how we become better at teaching and better at working with our students and, in turn, hopefully make our students better.

In this particular instance, Mr. Spirit pointed to the importance of being in a supportive environment, especially when his work is called into question in his professional life. His emotion shows that he feels, at times, alienated and undervalued as a teacher. Pointing to the power of the group, Mr. Spirit expressed the importance of a collective effort in supporting all of their students. The inquiry group provided Mr.

Spirit with the collegial support that he was not able to find when trying to implement a critical and culturally relevant pedagogy because of the disconnect he felt at his school site. Along with this, Mr. Spirit had a group of teachers that aligned with him on a philosophical level, which encouraged him to continue doing the work in which he was engaged. Being able to make these connections seemed to show Mr. Spirit there are other teachers working toward similar goals of developing critical and culturally relevant practices while facing similar struggles. It was instances like the one described above that call for a deeper understanding of what happens when teachers come together to learn, think, and collaborate with one another in order to interrogate their practice from a place that centers colonialism as a root cause of inequities.

Being able to develop solidarity with others who share these similar beliefs supported teachers in validating their own educational philosophies and practices. For example, after a general body meeting, Ms. Ides was asked her thoughts regarding her willingness to come to the meetings:

> **Ms. Ides:** It feels good to see a room full of teachers that want to learn more about the issues in the community and then use that to be a teacher that's critical. After a week of teaching, making the effort to get here [to the meeting] by 5:30 is hard; and it's on a Friday. I get really close to saying, "I'll go next time." But then I remember that after the meeting I feel really good.

> **Researcher:** How does coming to the meetings make you feel good?

> **Ms. Ides:** Well, like tonight we talked about defining what health and wellness means for us as teachers and so we don't ever talk about that at my school. It's like the big elephant in the room that no one's talking about, but there's a lot of teachers that aren't happy at my school and that's not healthy. And because we have these conversations, I feel like maybe I'm not crazy, because I think we should be talking about this because that's how we take care of our community.

Ms. Ides pointed to the ways she enjoys coming to the meetings and being around teachers that are working to develop an understanding of the sociopolitical context of the community. Being able to see teachers that are interested in developing a critical teaching practice seems to give Ms. Ides the feeling that she is not alone on her path to develop herself as a teacher that is community responsive. Although it may be difficult to make the meeting after a long week of teaching, she felt rejuvenated by the support of like-minded teachers and conversations about matters that were important to her and her students. This is important, especially when the teaching profession is unable to retain 50% of new teachers (e.g., Ingersoll, 2003; Nieto, 2003). Finding a space where teachers feel they can find the support to persist is an important reminder of the power in coming together with others and sharing social justice approaches to develop personally and professionally.

When asked to explain more, Ms. Ides discussed her experience with the conversation in the Health and Wellness committee. Thinking about the ways the group of like-minded teachers discussed the notion of care, Ms. Ides seemed to be able to find a place that resonated with her thoughts about how to balance a busy and sometimes chaotic teaching load with her life outside of the workplace. Looking to discuss ideas about health and wellness at her school, she could face hostility from other teachers that do not see the relevance of the topic, further pushing her to the margins of her school community. However, having the space to talk openly about the struggles she faces at her school, while also thinking about ways to care about herself and her community, Ms. Ides worked to validate her experiences and feelings of alienation in a school that did not value open dialogue about self-care.

The feeling of teachers finding a community with other teachers with shared beliefs speaks to how this organization is working to dismantle how some teachers feel alienated from others in their profession. Coming together with other like-minded teachers extends their network of teachers, moving them away from the feelings of disconnection they experience at their schools.

Community

To create an environment ripe for learning, Valenzuela (2010) points to the importance of "authentic care" with young Latina/o students. The notion of "authentic care" provides useful insight about the types of relationships that either subtract from, or add to, students' positive experiences with education. The

findings from this study overwhelmingly point to the importance of extending this notion of authentic care to critical educators. Building community is a key component to working in the classroom and it is essential when course content asks students to take risks and interrogate their own and other's beliefs. hooks (2000) refers to the notion of Beloved Community as the affirmation of the whole person, an acknowledgement of the ways our histories have shaped the whole person. Developing community is an important aspect of the work of People's Ed, and members valued the connections they were able to make with one another. For instance, Ms. Ramos, a ninth grade English teacher expressed that as she participated in the inquiry group, she felt a sense of community. Speaking to this idea Ms. Ramos stated:

> We're all teachers, but it's not like that's all of who we are. We talk shop, but they'll also ask about me, what I did for break or over the weekend or whatever. And so it feels different when I see them because we know about each other and we stay connected. And that's a part of our [makes a gesture with her fingers to signal quotations] "work."

The People's Ed inquiry group sought to develop pedagogies and curricula that benefit their students but in doing so this group of teachers took a humanizing approach where they engaged in the process to develop community with one another. Ms. Ramos expressed that the intellectual and professional development she received was valuable because the group also was invested in finding out more about each other. Going back to hooks' (2000) notion of a beloved community, Ms. Ramos found the group important to her because of the ways her humanity was affirmed. Ms. Ramos saw that the group acknowledged her as more than a teacher. The inquiry group members saw her as a whole person and acknowledged her humanity.

When asked about her thoughts regarding the inquiry group, Ms. Hela talked about the importance of the relationships she had created with the other participants:

> I can have deeper conversations with people that I've already built with in the way that we have. It makes me feel like it's a safe place where I can bring up problems. Just knowing that that place exists when I come up against stuff at school that, in of itself, is powerful.

Because the group took the time and care to develop community, Ms. Hela expressed that she could have deeper and more meaningful conversations in the inquiry group space when compared to the conversations she has at her school. For Ms. Hela, developing community with this group of teachers seems to give her the strength to deal with challenges she faces at her school. Like Ms. Hela, several teachers in the inquiry group have expressed the importance of building meaningful relationships with one another that are supportive, caring, and collaborative. The teachers' inquiry group came about from the need to create a space where teachers experienced a sense of solidarity with other like-minded educators to develop pedagogies as critical educators. This collaborative group was designed to serve as a nurturing and supportive space for teachers to struggle through the challenges of teaching for liberation in the urban context.

Building community, for People's Ed, was not just about creating networks of shared beliefs and support, but also developing compassionate strategies for dealing with conflict. In many schools, addressing issues of conflict can be difficult and issues of conflict typically end with punitive measures that leave little room for reflection much less encouraging a sense of community between all those involved. People's Ed enacted accountability circles to deal with conflict between members in order to reimagine what it means to be accountable for one's actions. Ms. Vee, a member of People's Ed, recounts her experience with an accountability circle after an incident with another member, Ms. Mia:

> I was initially very confused when I was notified I was asked to have an accountability meeting with another member [Ms. Mia]. I did not think I had done any wrongdoing and that the member was taking organizational decisions personally instead of seeing that it was in the best interest of the organization. But after our initial meeting and hearing her perspective on how everything happened, I understood why she was hurt. My comments and actions made her feel dismissed and hurt her greatly. The process helped me remember that although my actions may have been in the best interest of the organization, I have to remember there are people involved, and that I could have, and should have, handled the situation differently. It wasn't about my intentions but more so about the reality experienced by my colleague.

Creating the infrastructure to have hard conversations about feeling hurt or disrespected allowed Ms. Mia the opportunity to express how she felt dismissed by Ms. Vee. Additionally, through this process that engaged the two in conversation about intention and approach, Ms. Vee was provided with the space to reflect on how her actions impacted someone else. This form of teacher-led organization stands in direct contrast to the ways teachers are de-professionalized, and positioned to be in competition with each other when it comes to students' scores on standardized tests. Participants in the study experienced their involvement in People's Ed as a place where they felt a sense of community with others because of the care taken to get to know each other, address conflict, and develop a sociopolitical analysis of teaching and learning.

Commitment

This third most recurring theme of solidarity, commitment, continuously emerged across the interviews with members. Much of People's Ed is committed to organizing campaigns, political education, and teacher development of transformative pedagogies, however the organization also saw that a practice that challenges colonialism necessitates self-inquiry, care for the community, and healing. Being part of a movement to transform cultural norms takes a great deal of dedication and discipline. As Boggs (1972) points out, "It takes a lot of time and patience; a lot of hard work … and unrelenting self-criticism and struggle to overcome your own shortcomings" (p. 1). Along with this, one must be persistent in understanding the scope of the struggle one is up against (Boggs, 1972), all the while improving oneself to better serve the people. As the teachers in this study commit themselves to challenge the teaching profession by looking beyond what is offered to them at their schools, they are further committing themselves to developing their analysis of the systemic issues they are up against and to solidifying their commitment to the group and the practices that support them in undoing isolation and alienation.

Having a space that allows members to make sense of their sociopolitical realities can be meaningful for some teachers who want to understand the inequities they see in their schools. For People's Ed members, this space became a place they looked forward to because it supported them with developing an analysis of schools and their profession that further committed them to their work. Speaking to this point, Ms. Nieto said:

> Over time I've noticed working with other teachers in People's Ed began to change the way I saw the community I was teaching in, like, I've developed a deeper understanding of the historical, social, political condition that the young people and their families are struggling to survive through in a community like Watts has really deepened my commitment to teach long-term in the community and to struggle for change even outside the school. And that's what I need to teach in the classroom, the connection between all of that.

Through many aspects of what the organization offers members and the broader community, educators engaged in the process to make the connections between what they saw in their schools and larger society. The organization supported Ms. Nieto's development and her deeper understanding of the struggle faced by the community in which she works. Connecting the dots related to her experiences as a teacher and the larger social context, she is better able to make sense of her role as an educator. A deeper understanding of what Ms. Nieto sees as the injustices her students face fuels her purpose and inspires her to stay in the teaching profession. In her classroom, Ms. Nieto draws on this deeper analysis to think about what she should teach her students and the ways oppression and struggling for justice can look like in the community.

The notion of commitment was evident among participants across the data set. As Ms. Reyes expressed, as a part of the organization she felt compelled to attend meetings because of the commitment she had to other members and the larger purpose they shared—being better educators for their students. As members were packing up their bags at the end of the meeting on a Friday night, Ms. Reyes shared her thoughts about why she continued to attend People's Ed meetings:

> I keep coming because it's how I deal with what I see every day in my school. I feel like I need to be here. The stuff we're working on and talking about, like, how to teach this way, even at a school like mine, makes me feel like I can

be a better teacher … And if I don't show up I feel like I'll be letting my working group down. But I'd also feel like I'm letting my own students down; they need me to be here as much as I do.

Ms. Reyes expressed that her work with People's Ed supported her in dealing with the conditions and challenges of teaching at her school. Just as important, she connected her work in People's Ed with her ability to serve her students well. For Ms. Reyes, being a member of People's Ed is connected to a larger purpose—understanding the context of schooling and the support she receives to develop into the kind of teacher that serves students well. Lastly, Ms. Reyes pointed to the commitment she had to the people of the organization. Even when it could feel difficult after a long week at her school, she still made the effort to attend the meetings on Friday evenings. Ms. Reyes was compelled by her relationships with and commitments to others; she could feel supported and also support others as they engaged in the work of the organization. Looking to connect with other teachers makes sense when teachers often report feelings of alienation at their schools. In order to address this, members of People's Ed were clear that the relationships among members were pivotal to the organization and as a result they were more willing to work together to achieve the social justice goals of the organization.

In order to create an environment where teachers can engage in models of developing with one another, accountability circles were used as an approach to facilitating conversations with members that had reported being in conflict with another member. Ms. Vee, who described her experience with an accountability circle above, recounts the ways she was encouraged to think differently about her participation in the organization as an approach to building solidarity with others in the People's Ed community. As part of the accountability process, Ms. Vee met with Ms. Mia, the other member involved in the accountability circle, in a follow-up meeting. The following data illustrates Ms. Vee's reflection about the accountability process and the ways she was encouraged to be reflective about her actions within the organization:

> It was very emotional as I thanked her for holding me accountable because I don't want to be that hypocritical organizer that claims to have love for the people but oppresses those around her … This was not my first tension within organizing, but it was my first accountability circle, and I am extremely grateful for this experience, as it has been the healthiest resolution, allowing both of us to continue to work and grow together in a loving and accountable space. Knowing that we're [People's Ed] trying to create these kinds of spaces make me feel like I want to keep coming back because I want to learn how I can be better for my community.

Participating in the accountability circle seemed to allow Ms. Vee the space to reflect deeply about her own participation in the organization and with other people. This process supported Ms. Vee with engaging in what could have been a difficult discussion regarding the ways her actions impacted another person in the organization. Instead Ms. Vee was provided with the opportunity to work through understanding how her actions may have been perceived by others. Through this structure she was exposed to different approaches to deal with hard conversations. Ms. Vee was able to be in a space where conflict could be resolved in a manner that respected all those involved and allowed her the space to learn from and grow with other members.

Developing an infrastructure for members to deal with conflict in ways that dramatically differ from what teachers see at their schools or even in broader society allows them the opportunity to engage with approaches to conflict that can be more holistic and foster relationships that are humanizing. Ms. Vee pointed to the importance of participating in the accountability circle because it provided her with a different model of how to deal with conflict and her hope is that she will be able to transfer these skills to her work with other members of her community. Through creating the spaces for teachers to come together in authentic ways, People's Ed members further committed themselves to developing meaningful relationships with each other as they dedicated themselves to the larger work of addressing issues of educational equity in their communities.

Participants expressed a sense of solidarity with other members because of the many ways they were able to interact with others. The teachers were able to engage with each other in ways that allowed them to build meaningful relationships that supported them in developing their classroom practice and navigating the challenges at their school. Meaningful relationships for People's Ed members included feelings

of being cared for, which drew them to committing to their work with the organization. One of the many examples that speak to this point, Ms. Garcia expressed the following:

> What's kept me coming back is, like, everyone I feel is very sincere and takes that space very seriously, and I feel like it's a place that I can grow and be nurtured as far as growing in not only my own classroom and the way that I do my own thing, but also through the readings that we do and the relationships that we maintain with each other. I love that space, it's really dear to my heart because I feel it's a place where I resonate with people and that's why I keep coming back.

A common sentiment held by participants is that there is a sincere level of care and respect for one another. Having a place where participants are able to support one another to develop professionally and have authentic relationships with other teachers supported the participants in dedicating themselves to develop as teachers while also making the long and taxing work of organizing and teaching sustainable. Mr. Spirit summed up this idea of the importance of relationships among the participants by saying, "We are all committed to each other." Commitment to others working toward similar goals of justice and equity were important across the interviews and observations as a way to combat feelings of isolation. This is important for teachers as they confront the alienation they experience at their schools with building and committing to a vast network of teachers that span across Los Angeles County as they develop a critical teaching practice that meets the needs of their students.

Discussion

More than creating curriculum, members of People's Ed sought to break through the barriers that can make teaching feel like an alienating experience as they engaged in the struggle for justice at varying school sites. Teachers in the organization expressed the importance of building meaningful relationships with one another that were supportive and humanizing. These collaborative groups served as a nurturing and supportive space for teachers to struggle through the challenges of teaching for liberation in the urban context.

What People's Ed shows us is the importance of creating autonomous spaces for teachers to engage in practices that allow them to (re)connect with one another. Building solidarity among teachers has the most potential to empower and inspire teachers to develop critical pedagogical practices that meet the holistic needs of their students. The work of People's Ed explains the importance of creating the spaces to share, collaborate, and build with one another. Specifically, we learned the ways teachers draw from each other as they think, learn, and grow in spaces that are humanizing, which provided a foundation to build up their capacity to develop pedagogical practices that challenge currents structures of schooling. While we put forth a call for teachers and teacher educators to create supportive spaces to develop critical and culturally relevant pedagogies, we do not suggest the goal is to simply fit into existing oppressive institutions that emulate current systems of schooling. Instead, the example of schooling in the U.S. used to dehumanize and assimilate People of Color is what to avoid and disrupt.

We must commit ourselves to two tasks: understanding the current oppressive school systems in order to avoid imitating them when creating our own spaces, and charting a new course that reimagines ways of relating to and learning from one another. With the People's Ed's emphasis on developing autonomous spaces, we have come to understand the importance of engaging in the long, hard process of transforming the self in an effort to remake the world. In discussing the isolation and alienation felt by critical teachers, this article explored the ways in which teachers sought out colleagues to be in solidarity with while navigating dehumanizing institutions. It is a call for a deeper understanding of the ways colonial values and beliefs impact our daily lives, and of the ways we can heal and renew our commitment to serve our students and communities.

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