Educating All to Struggle for Social Change and Transformation:
Introduction to Case Studies of Critical Praxis

Special Guest Editors

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Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights specifies that “everyone has the right to education” (United Nations, 1948).[1] A commitment to the universal right to education mobilized various actors in 1990 to issue the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA), which states that “every person . . . shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs . . . required by human beings to . . . to live and work in dignity . . . [and] to improve the quality of their lives” (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990, Article I). The universal right to education also motivated a similar set of actors in 2000 to develop the Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments, which re-states a global commitment “to the achievement of education for all (EFA) goals and targets for every citizen and for every society” (UNESCO, 2000, p. 8).

However, recent reports monitoring progress toward achieving education for all by 2015 offer sober assessments. UNESCO (2012, p. 4) indicates that “on current trends, the goal of universal primary education (UPE) will be missed by a large margin. . . . Between 2008 and 2010, progress stalled altogether.” UIS (2013, pp. 1, 3) reports that “new data show that the world is unlikely . . . to get every child in school by 2015. . . . [Moreover], there has been little progress in reducing the rate at which children leave school before reaching the last grade of primary education.”

Additionally, although the Dakar Framework for Action affirms that “no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by lack of resources” (UNESCO, 2000, p. 9), there is dispiriting evidence that the international community has not lived up to this responsibility. This is despite the fact that many low- and middle-income countries have increasingly demonstrated their commitment to education for all. According to the EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2012):

Among low and middle income countries with comparable data, 63% have increased the share of national income spent on education in the past decade. Coupled with economic growth and greater government capacity to raise revenue, this led to significant increases in total educational expenditure. (p. 42)

Just as a final push is needed to reach the Education for All goals by 2015 . . . there are worrying signs that donor contributions may be slowing down. More money alone will not ensure that the EFA goals are reached, but less money will certainly be harmful.[2] (p. 142)

Global discussions about EFA goals for 2015 and, more so, global deliberations regarding post-2015 education goals have moved beyond access to concerns about improving the quality of education for those who gain access (see UNESCO, 2004). Both the 1990 and 2000 EFA
declarations gave attention to issues of educational quality,[3] though in recent years quality often has been defined narrowly in terms of performance on basic literacy and numeracy tests. As Education International (2012, pp. 4-5) points out:

Much attention in current post-2015 discussions is focused on a narrow view of learning: mainly testing in reading and mathematics. This is a mistake. . . . Evidence shows that other capabilities that foster innovation and build character are also crucial education outcomes, including: creativity, curiosity, civic-mindedness, solidarity, self-discipline, self-confidence, compassion, empathy, courage, self-awareness, resilience, leadership, humility, peace, and more.

That is, unless the post-2015 discussion includes a broader conception of educational quality, schools will be “emaciated spaces” (Jamil, 2013), where children and youth mainly engage in rote learning and memorization of content that is decontextualized from the realities of their lives.

Of course, there have been calls for broader views of education quality. For instance, Leon Tikly and Angeline Barrett (2011) argue that quality education should be grounded in three dimensions from a social justice perspective. First, they contend that quality education must provide learners with access to quality inputs that facilitate the development of capabilities that they and their communities have reason to value. Second, quality education must ensure that the outcomes of education are meaningful and relevant for learners and their communities and consistent with national priorities as well as a changing global context. And third, quality education must prepare learners to meaningfully participate and have a voice, not just in the classroom but also in decisions at the local, national, and global levels.

Defining education quality in this way moves us in the direction of engaging in a form of critical praxis, that is, combining theory and practical action designed to promote social change or transformation. One of the central questions for educators concerned with critical praxis is “Education for what purpose?” This philosophical, political, and practical question gains expression in sub-fields within the field of education, including multicultural education (Banks, 2004; Banks & Banks, 2006; McLaren, 1997; Sleeter, 1996), citizenship education (Biesta, 2011; Kennedy, 1997; Sehr, 1997), education for social justice (Anyon, 2009; Ayers, Quinn & Stovall, 2009), critical education (Apple & Beane, 2007; Apple, Au, & Gandin, 2009), critical pedagogy (Giroux & McLaren, 1989; Kirylo, 2013; Weiler & Mitchell, 1992), and human rights education (Bajaj, 2011). Taken in their richest forms, these sub-fields seek to break the tradition of schooling that reproduces inequities inherent in wider society.

Whether one adopts a human rights, multicultural, feminist, post-colonial, ecological, or socialist stance, it is clear that the world we live in requires change, even transformation (e.g., see Apple, 2013; Guajardo et al., 2008; Kreisberg, 1992).[4] For instance, Mark Ginsburg, Steve Moseley, and Mary Joy Pigozzi (2010, pp. 2-3) argue from a human rights perspective:

Currently, we are not living in a world where all people can realize the full range of human rights—including the right to education . . . To contribute to building a world in which such rights are realized,[5] educational system policies and
structures in all countries need to be transformed, while at the same time the content and processes of education have to be altered so they more effectively contribute to economic, political, and social/cultural transformation of local, national and global communities. (see also Bernstein Tarrow, 1987; Spring, 2000)

Another example is provided by the words of bell hooks (1994, pp. 11-12):

My pedagogical practices have emerged from the mutually illuminating interplay of anticolonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies. . . . [I]t has made it possible for me to imagine and enact pedagogical practices that . . . interrogat[e] biases in curricula that reinscribe systems of domination (such as racism and sexism) while simultaneously providing new ways to teach diverse groups of students. . . . The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy. . . . I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries . . . that makes education the practice of freedom.

And Paulo Freire (1970/2000, p. 51) draws on socialist and liberation theology perspectives to articulate an approach labeled pedagogy of the oppressed:

Reality which becomes oppressive results in the contradistinction of men as oppressors and oppressed. The latter’s task . . . is to struggle for their liberation together with those who show true solidarity . . . This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. . . . To achieve this goal, the oppressed must confront reality critically, simultaneously objectifying and acting upon that reality.

We should remember, however, previous generations also posited that education can and should be used as a vehicle for social transformation. For example, in his provocatively titled volume, Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order, George Counts (1932, p. 3) comments:

We are convinced that education is the one unfailing remedy for every ill to which [we are] subject, whether it be . . . war, poverty . . . injustice . . . [or] race hatred. . . . We even speak glibly and often about the general reconstruction of society through the school. We cling to this faith in spite of the fact that the very period in which our troubles have multiplied so rapidly has witnessed an unprecedented expansion of organized education.

A year later, in his book, The Mis-Education of the Negro, Carter Woodson (1933, p. 145) poses—and then answers—the question about whether teachers can “revolutionize the social order”: “But can we expect teachers to revolutionize the social order for the good of the community? Indeed we must expect this very thing. The education system of a country is worthless unless it accomplishes this task” (see also Apple, 2013, p. 42).

When engaging in critical praxis to foster social change and transformation, educators need to move beyond the classroom (Ginsburg, 1995). For example, Nicholas Fox (2012, p. 15) suggests that classroom activities are not enough:
As much as we talk politics with our students, read political novels, and highlight the activism of the past, the walls of the classroom present a problem for radical teachers. Our meetings host passionate discussions where students begin to tackle assumptions, dismantle ideas of privilege, even critique capitalism. But when class ends, what happens to the political fervor? Where does that revolutionary spark go? Does it spread out into the streets? Or does it end up at the bottom of backpacks, forgotten like last week’s homework?

Similarly, Jean Anyon (2009, p. 392) advises colleagues who are engaged in social justice education not to limit their—and their students’—actions to the context of the school:

> [A]lthough critical educators do well to share with students information about systemic causes of subordination, that is not enough to get students involved in the struggle for social justice. . . . By giving students direct experience with social justice work, we can educate them to appreciate and value those forms of democratic process that are aimed specifically at creating a more equitable society—public contention toward progressive social change.

At the same time, though, many scholars have concluded that education institutions often play the opposite role; that is, they contribute to economic, political, and social/cultural reproduction of existing human relations, nationally (see Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Morrow & Torres, 1995) and internationally (Brown & Laudner, 1997; Altbach & Kelly, 1978). Some researchers have identified cases in which students or teachers resist these reproductive processes (Ginsburg, 1995; Giroux, 1983). Nevertheless, education seems more often to be a reproductive force—providing unequal access to learning opportunities, preserving structures that limit at least some groups from realizing their human rights, and transmitting ideologies that legitimate structures or discourage people from trying to transform them (Tomasevski, 2006). The point is that education is not neutral, as Richard Schaul (1970/2000, p. 34) so nicely articulates in his introduction to Paulo Freire’s volume, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

> There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

Recognizing that the content, processes, and outcomes of education are not neutral, we have decided to focus this special issue of *Current Issues in Comparative Education* (CICE) on “education for social change and transformation.” We have sought to include in this volume case studies that illuminate a range of initiatives in various educational programs and institutions and in a variety of contexts.

Giving attention to these case studies is important because critical educators often toil in isolation or with support from only a few colleagues, striving for change—one lesson, one
student, one classroom, one school, or one community at a time. They refuse to accept the idea that the “is-ness” of our present condition makes us incapable of striving for the eternal “ought-ness” that confronts us (King, Jr., 2001). Educators laboring to promote change and transformation through education represent possibilities for wider systemic change at the national, regional, and global levels, working from the bottom up.

These case studies illuminate different conceptions of how education can be used to promote progressive social change—and, indeed, signal different notions of what progressive social change means. Each of the case studies also illustrates some degree of success in achieving program goals, while simultaneously identifying the challenges faced by those involved. Their stories encourage us to remember that critical praxis is both absolutely essential and profoundly difficult.

In her article, “Theatre-Arts Pedagogy for Social Justice,” Anne Hickling-Hudson analyzes the socio-educational significance of a theatre arts approach to learning for young adults from less-privileged communities in Jamaica. She discusses how the pedagogy employed by the Area Youth Foundation (AYF) in its workshops, rehearsals, and performances is a form of critical praxis, informed by Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed and Augusto Boal’s theatre of the oppressed. Based on interviews with AYF’s leader and some of the participants, Anne describes how violence and oppressive conditions become the focus of their critical analysis and their artistic expression. The workshops provide space for sharing and analyzing their personal stories, which subsequently inform the content of plays and other public performances. She documents the powerful impact that the AYF experience has in developing the participants’ humanist, epistemic, technical, and public literacies. Many of the youth acquire knowledge and skills that are not available through the formal education system in Jamaica and that open up career opportunities. Equally important, they also gain deeper understandings of their social context, learn strategies for reducing inter-group antagonism and violence, and develop commitments to challenge injustices in their society.

In her article, “Promoting Change within the Constraints of Conflict,” Karen Ross explores the approach to transformative education utilized by Sadaka Reut, a binational civil society organization in Israel that works with Jewish and Palestinian youth. She draws on interviews and observations focused mainly on activities organized for Jewish Israeli youth, prior to their involvement in joint activities with their Palestinian Israeli peers. She describes how the program seeks to educate youth for social change by using their personal experiences as the basis for initiating discussion and then guiding participants to see broader cultural and structural features of society in which these personal experiences are embedded. She presents qualitative evidence that the youth develop more complex and critical views of their lived experiences, though it is less clear to what extent they develop the commitment and capability to pursue cultural and structural changes that seem warranted given their emergent critiques of society. Karen also calls attention to the dilemma faced by Sadaka Reut. In order to attract participation from a broad group of Jewish Israelis, the staff—Jewish as well as Palestinian Israelis—have felt the need to organize many of the activities separately for Jewish and Palestinian Israeli youth and to create a public image of the organization as not focused solely on the Jewish-Palestinian conflict or on binational partnership as a strategy for change.
In their article, “Promoting Civic Engagement in Schools in Non-Democratic Settings,” Maryam Abolfazli and Maryam Alemi analyze the Online School of Civic Education. This initiative, funded by the U.S. government and organized by an NGO based in the United States, seeks to encourage teachers in Iran to exchange ideas toward changing their classroom practices to encourage students’ active learning, reflection, and critical thinking on topics in civic education. The authors state that Iranian authorities define citizenship as devotion to religious ideology and obedience to political/religious elites. The article indicates that the participants in the Online School courses are diverse in terms of their ethnic/religious identities, their geographic locations, and the subjects they teach. We learn that pedagogical strategies encouraged by the project organizers or shared by on-line participants are implemented with varying degrees of success. It appears that teachers participating in the course are enthusiastic about the strategies they learn, and they report that many of their students appreciate the different way of being involved in the classroom. Given the nature of the case study presented, however, it is not clear in what ways the Iranian students’ experience in the particular class affect what they try to do in other classes they have, let alone whether the experience leads them to act differently in their families and communities.

In their article, “Teacher Education for Social Change,” Scott Ritchie, Neporcha Cone, Sohyun An, and Patricia Bullock present findings from a qualitative practitioner-research case study undertaken at a large public university in the southeastern United States. The authors report on their efforts as faculty members teaching four content methods courses (language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies) to a cohort of 16 primary school teacher education students in the semester prior to their student teaching. They designed the class sessions, readings, and field experiences of these courses to emphasize social justice dimensions of teaching rather than just focusing on skills and strategies. Drawing on focus group interviews, class discussions, and students’ written reflections on readings and field assignments, the authors indicate that students from a politically conservative community came to recognize the racial and social class inequities in American society and the role that teaching and schooling can play to reinforce or reduce these inequities. The participating students also began to consider what actions they could take—as teachers—to improve things, at least for their own students. The authors, however, acknowledge that while their collaboration with the four courses likely increased the impact of their teachings (compared to prior, more isolated efforts), there was a need for a more comprehensive approach in the College and in the schools where field experiences occur. This would reinforce students’ commitment and capacity to pursue social change in their classrooms and perhaps within the community, at least locally.

In their article, focused on “Re-framing, Re-imagining, and Re-tooling Curricula from the Grassroots,” Isaura B. Pulido, Gabriel Alejandro Cortez, Ann Aviles de Bradley, Anton Miglietta, and David Stovall explore the work of the Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Taskforce (CGCT). This group, based in the city of Chicago in the United States, produces curricula that more adeptly capture the cultural, economic, and political realities of students who attend the city’s public schools. As members of the CGCT, the coauthors examine the collaborative processes involving parents, teachers, students, community members/activists, and educational researchers to produce CGTC’s first unit, “Urban Renewal or Urban Removal.” A series of meetings and workshops involving more than 155 people resulted in a unit curriculum map (content outline, essential questions, key projects, and learning activities). Subsequently, 22
classroom educators, 20 artists, 18 displaced residents, 15 college students, 12 high school students, five housing activists, and four university faculty contributed poems, stories, and visuals for the unit. The article also explores how faculty members and students in the College of Education at Northeastern Illinois University became involved in the CGCT. For example, courses in the teacher education and administrator education program made use of and extended the content of the “Urban Renewal and Urban Removal” unit. The article does not document how the experiences may have changed participants’ perspectives, let alone how they may have become involved in collective action aimed at changing the conditions of life in inner city Chicago. However, it does provide evidence that people can be mobilized to discuss and reflect critically on aspects of their context in ways that likely not only increased their insights but also challenged at least some of their assumptions about why things are the way they are.

In their article, “Education Community Dialogue towards Building a Policy Agenda for Adult Education,” Tatiana Lotierzo Hirano, Giovanna Modé Magalhães, Camilla Croso, Laura Gianneckini, and Fabíola Munhoz share the experience of the “Amplifying Voices” initiative. This initiative, which is organized by the Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education, conducts interviews with students involved in adult education programs in a range of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Their stories, their concerns, and their program and policy advice are then uploaded to a website, as well as presented to policy makers and other stakeholders at various public events. The article presents excerpts from rich narratives elicited via interviews. It is clear that those whose voices have been recorded and broadcast value education very deeply and also have cogent recommendations for how adult education could be improved for them and for others who did not benefit fully from schooling as children. Less clear for readers is how their voices are heard by decision makers and how the structured reflection on their personal experience encourages those interviewed to become more active in individual or collective struggles to improve the education system and the political and economic institutions that affect their lives.

In their article, “Chilean Student Movements,” Cristián Bellei and Cristian Cabalin examine two recent mobilizations initiated by students in Chile that challenged the neoliberal education policies of that country. They discuss the 2006 “Penguin Revolution,” led by secondary school students, and the issues and events of the 2011 “Chilean Winter,” led by university students. In both cases the students (and, later, other societal actors) protested the extreme degree of privatization and marketization of the Chilean educational system. In this article we learn little about how and why students came to critique these aspects of the education system which survived—and indeed were strengthened—after the end of the Pinochet dictatorship. However, Bellei and Cabalin inform us about how the activist students used a variety of strategies and media to educate and mobilize others to join marches, rallies, and other forms of political action. We also come to see how governing elites were forced to act, although such actions did not fully respond to the demands of the protesters. The article helps us understand how students can be highly relevant political actors in educational as well as broader social policy debates.

Often academic spaces fail to make room for voices of practitioners or activists. So, it is significant that this special issue of an open access journal presents a collection of voices of academics, practitioners, and activists. The voices highlighted through these case studies are significant in two main senses. First, they underscore a conception of education as a holistic
endeavor that engages both the learning institution as well as the community in which it is embedded. The successes as well as the challenges inherent in these initiatives highlight the need for coalition and consensus building within learning institutions as well as between those who are involved in these institutions and others who live and work in the surrounding communities. Second, the inclusion of this range of actors recognizes the importance of allowing voices to speak that are ordinarily unheard, excluded, or silenced in debates about schooling—for instance, about how best to educate all, not just some, in our societies.

By broadcasting the voices of those directly engaged in the struggle to improve conditions, we make important strides towards breaking down barriers that separate people, we connect the disparate threads of endeavors aimed at a common purpose, and we illuminate possibilities for larger-scale change that is informed from the bottom up. By capturing the rich complexity of these “small stories,” we answer the call by Apple et al. (2007) to serve as critical educators by challenging what counts as “research” through acting as “secretaries” to those groups of people or social movements who are engaged in challenging structural inequalities.

Notes:

[2]. Additionally, the Report indicates that the private sector is not making a significant contribution: “Private organizations contribute to EFA in several ways, but . . . their support is equivalent to 5% of what was spent by official donors on education in 2010—and of that only a small share is spent on EFA priorities” (UNESCO, 2012, p. 169; see also van Fleet, 2011).

[3]. For instance, Article III: Universalizing Access and Promoting Equity of the Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All states: “Basic education should be provided to all children, youth and adults. To this end, basic education services of quality should be expanded and consistent measures must be taken to reduce disparities” (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990). And point seven of the Dakar Framework for Action identifies as a commitment “ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality” (UNESCO, 2000).

[4]. However, Patti Lather (2001, p. 192) encourages critical educators to avoid assuming that existing conceptualizations provide a definite portrait of the nature of the transformed society: “As an arena of practice, critical pedagogy might serve a transvaluation of praxis if it can find a way to participate in the struggle of these forces as we move toward an experience of the promise that is unforseeable from the perspective of our present conceptual frameworks.” Similarly, Guajardo et al. (2008, p. 16) suggest that “we must be patient with people, respect them, and meet them where they are,” as Myles Horton (Adams & Horton, 1975) professed. We see this change as a long, sustained effort where the work must focus on both micro- and macro-levels . . . we work for local change, but a change that is couched in broader social, cultural, and economic contexts.”
[5]. Human rights can be grouped in the following categories (see also Marshall, 1964): economic/welfare rights, political/civil rights, and social/cultural rights (see Ginsburg et al., 2010, p. 2).

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