



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION | UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA

**JOURNAL OF CURRICULUM, TEACHING,  
LEARNING, AND LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION**

Volume 3

Issue 1 *Special Issue: Socio-Political Issues in  
Education*

Article 12

December 2018

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Rebecca Rogers

*University of Missouri-St. Louis*, rogersrl@umsl.edu

Luzkarime Calle Díaz

*Universidad del Norte, Colombia*, luzkarimec@uninorte.edu.co

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## Recommended Citation

Rogers, Rebecca and Calle Díaz, Luzkarime (2018) "Exploring Solidarity in Teacher Learning and Activism for Social Justice," *Journal of Curriculum, Teaching, Learning and Leadership in Education*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/ctlle/vol3/iss1/12>

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# EXPLORING SOLIDARITY IN TEACHER LEARNING AND ACTIVISM FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Rebecca Rogers  
University of Missouri-St. Louis

Luzkarime Calle Díaz  
Universidad del Norte, Colombia

*Abstract: Teaching and organizing for social justice can be an alienating experience in the current educational climate. Being a part of a network of educators can help create community, support, and solidarity. Solidarity is a socio-political topic that has been understudied and, we argue, holds great potential for understanding the transformative power of educators organizing for social justice. In this paper, we draw on examples of educators' narratives of solidarity who contributed to a social justice event organized by a grassroots educators' organization. Through the narratives of a community organizer, a classroom educator, and a community based arts educator, we highlight the themes and discursive resources that were typical expressions of solidarity across the data set. We argue that being able to recognize solidarity as a process and practice can lead to a more strategic approach to social justice movement building for schools and communities.*

“I don't believe that women and men of the world, independent of their political positions yet conscious of their dignity as men and women, will not want to reflect on the sense of foreboding...that one day will lead to a new rebellion where the critical word, the humanist philosophy, the commitment to solidarity, the prophetic denunciation of the negation of men and women, and the proclamation of a world worthy of human habitation will be the instruments of change and transformation.” Paulo Freire, 1998.

The above quote from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of Freedom* speaks of a world where people work together for social change and liberation. Educators, in and outside schools, constitute a powerful force who can work together for educational liberation. It is a matter of finding spaces where we can join *in solidarity* to raise our voices and act for social justice.

Community based sites for teacher learning exist across the nation and world. Some of these are focused on social justice, equity, and position teachers as activists working together for educational equity and justice. Educators for Social Justice (ESJ) is an example of one of these groups. ESJ is a grassroots, teacher-led professional development organization whose mission is to develop and support socially just practices in schools. ESJ provides a range of transformative learning contexts for educators across the lifespan, school district, geographical region to contribute to social justice education (e.g. Inquiry-to-Action Groups, racial equity curriculum partnership, a teacher-led conference). Many of the leaders in this group identify as educational leaders, activists, and social justice educators.

From working with ESJ<sup>1</sup> we have experienced reciprocity and community as we collaborate alongside other educators for social justice in schools. We refer to this sense of connection as *solidarity* which is an important construct in building social movements for educational justice. Darder (2017) writes “the transformation of schools can only take place when teachers, working in solidarity, take ownership and struggle to radically change the political and economic structures of power that defile our revolutionary dreams” (p. 509).

The incorporation of humanization and solidarity is one of the most important challenges for education in the twenty first century, and it has been a central pillar in critical pedagogy (Fránquiz & Salazar, 2004; Freire, 1996; Freire, Freire & Ferreira, 2014; Giroux, 2006). Solidarity is a socio-political topic that has been understudied and, we argue, holds great potential for understanding the transformative power of educators organizing for social justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers is part of ESJ's Board, a member of the annual Conference Planning Committee, presenter at the conference, and co-founder. Calle-Diaz was a presenter at the conference.

There is a body of literature on solidarity that crosses health care (Sans, 1992; Chinitz, Preker & Wasem, 1998; Maarse & Paulus, 2003), economics (Allard, Davidson & Matthaei, 2008; Kawano, Masterson & Teller-Elsberg, 2010; Laville, 2010) and intergenerational relationships (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Daatland & Lowenstein, 2005). Much of the scholarship on the subject (Bayertz, 1999; Komter, 2005; Koster, 2009; Parsons, 1951; Stjernø, 2004) agrees on some common characteristics of solidarity: it arises from a community of practice; it promotes a common good; it is shaped by belonging; it can be voluntary or compulsory; it may occur within an oppressed community against an oppressive system, or it can serve as a way for a privileged community to stand up for those who are less privileged.

Situated in a longitudinal, ethnographic study of Educators for Social Justice, this paper explores the concept of solidarity through one of ESJ's annual events—the Educating for Change Curriculum Conference<sup>2</sup>. The Educating for Change conference is an annual social justice conference led by educators. The theme of the 2018 conference was “Building Counter-narratives for Radical Hope and Healing.” Taking a closer look at this conference, we reasoned, could help us to theorize about solidarity as a practice and process. We asked: How might listening to voices from the Educating for Change conference provide a window into understanding the complexity of solidarity in organizing for social justice education? What thematic and discursive contours characterize contributors' descriptions and experiences of solidarity at this event?

## Context

The 13th annual Educating for Change Curriculum Conference was held at a public middle school centrally located in a Midwestern urban area. From the planning sessions to the event itself, the conference is a social experiment in teacher-led organizing. The planning committee invites nationally known and local educators and activists to give keynote presentations on social justice themes. There are dozens of workshops, interactive curriculum tables displaying social justice curriculum, and organizational resource tables. There were 300 people in attendance including parents, community members, students, teachers, community activists, administrators, and educational leaders.

## Data Sources

We generated data within an appreciative inquiry paradigm (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008) that seeks to identify and describe aspects of positive organizational growth and development. Our focus in this paper is on just one year of the Educating for Change conference. Thus, we focused on creating a record of the event through field notes and reflective memos (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995); a story bank of teachers' interviews (N=11); and documents that provide a record of the conference activities (e.g. conference program). The story banked interviews were short (approximately 5-10 minutes) and included questions such as “Tell a story about an interaction that occurred today that made a lasting impression on you,” “What do you value most about participating in this conference?” “What gives you hope as a social justice educator?”

## Analysis

Our analysis was informed by critical discourse studies (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2013; Martín-Rojo, 2010) and, in particular, a strand that is referred to as positive discourse analysis (PDA) (Rogers & Mosley, 2014; Rogers, 2018; Bartlett, 2012; Macgilchrist, 2007; Martin & Rose, 2003). PDA emphasizes discourses of liberation, rather than those of oppression. As Martin (2004) affirms, PDA may allow the examination

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<sup>2</sup> The research was initiated from a charge by ESJ's Board in 2015. ESJ was invited to participate in a symposium focused on race and power in schools and communities at *NCTE's Whole Language Umbrella: Literacies for All Summer Institute* held in St. Louis, Missouri (Rogers & Labadie, 2016). To respond to this call, a study design was developed to examine the effectiveness of ESJ's efforts across people, contexts, and time. We received Institutional Review Board approval and the expressed consent of contributors.

and understanding of “how change happens, for the better, across a range of sites” (p. 7). PDA can shed light into processes of social transformation that make the world a better place.

We transcribed the short interviews, reread the field notes and conference program. Next, we inductively analyzed the data sources to describe how solidarity was represented. At this stage, we noticed themes of reciprocity between teachers and community activists, working across lines of difference, and feelings associated with collaboratively working toward social justice. We identified “narratives of solidarity” across participants and then identified three people who represented different positionalities (e.g. teacher, community activist, community based arts educator). Their narratives of solidarity represented what Mitchell (1984) calls “telling cases” that “serve to make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent” (p. 239). We analyzed the narratives to identify discursive patterns at the level of ideas (e.g. lexical focus; silences), grammatical functions (e.g. tense; modality; transitivity; appraisal; nominalization), and textual cohesion (e.g. intertextuality; metaphors) that characterized representations of solidarity.

## Findings: Building Solidarity

In the opening letter of the conference program, the planning committee wrote, “This year’s conference represents the hard work of a dedicated planning committee that has been preparing for the conference all year. This kind of collective work is at the heart of the collective agency and community building we hope to foster.” Concepts such as “working together” and “power as educators” underlie the spirit of organizing for social justice education. We chose narratives from three people who contributed to the conference and represent different positionalities (e.g. community organizer, teacher, community based educator). Each narrative includes themes and discursive resources that were typical expressions of solidarity across the data set. Being able to recognize solidarity as a process and practice can lead to a more strategic approach to social justice movement building.

### *Community Organizer: “Some of us out here working on this”*

A community organizer with a faith based organization describes her experience of feeling connected with the educators at the conference because of a shared awareness about the “school-to-prison-pipeline.” She described how she often needs to explain to community members that young children can be suspended (“the pipeline”). We hear in the following narrative how this sense of being understood left a positive impression on her.

To make connections with people, to introduce the work that we were doing in this area around breaking the school prison pipeline. Teachers and administrators, they know there is a pipeline, and that this can happen. So I think, making those connections, and knowing that people are working on this issue. And ways that educators possibly can’t whether it is time constraints or whatever, there are some of us out here we’re working on this issue too at other levels and with different groups.

She hopes her organization’s presence at the conference sends a signal to teachers that “people are working on this issue.” While teachers may interrupt the pipeline through culturally responsive pedagogies and keeping children in classrooms, they are not necessarily talking with policy makers. She expresses this through the modal “can’t” in “in ways that educators can’t.” She reinforces the distributed effort on this campaign through the present progressive, collectively framed action “we’re working on this issue too at other levels and with different groups.” The attitude running through this text is agentic and hopeful.

She describes why mutual organizing is important. “It’s a long process because we are changing minds and changing hearts...And to know people *do* know about this issue and are wanting different tools to be able to help our students to be successful...That spurs me on to keep working on this and stay involved in this long process.” Her lexical choices indicate that transformation occurs cognitively and relationally with an emphasis placed on the endurance necessary to stick with what she repetitively refers to as a “long process.” This network can be used to leverage policy changes.

I think a force not only in the community to connect educators and people working on the social justice issues but also at some point it is going to have to get to our representatives in the legislature. And our school boards. If people know that there is a large group of people working on this issue, and really want change; that is powerful to move school boards, to move legislators, to make the policy changes that need to happen.

She positively evaluates the capacity of educators, activists, and community organizers coming together to interrupt the school-to-prison-pipeline as “powerful.” This expression of mutual effort and “power together” was expressed by many of the educational leaders.

*Teacher: “Someone that I think is walking that same path as me”*

Educators often describe feeling afraid, lonely or uncertain about integrating social justice into their classrooms (Catone, 2017; Picower, 2012; Rogers, Mosley, Kramer & LSJTRG, 2009). They feel uncertain about responses from children, parents, and their colleagues. In this narrative, a teacher is excited that he has met another teacher who may be walking a similar path. I met at this table a woman that teaches 5<sup>th</sup> grade and we found out very quickly that separately we have been wrestling with a lot of the same things as teachers, where we knew we just need to push our students a little bit further and, but really we were struggling with what does that look like and is to going to be too messy, too complicated and it was really exciting for me to hear someone that I think is walking that same path as me. And we immediately could exchange ideas and experiences and support and sounds like, moving ahead we are going to continue to keep that conversation going. So, that is really exciting.

The present progressive tense of the verbs “wrestling” and “struggling” suggest an ongoing dilemma that both teachers have faced alone. Their meeting at the conference stands in contrast and is characterized by an immediate connection “we found out very quickly” and resulted in an instant set of options “we immediately could exchange ideas, and experiences, and support.” He amplifies the positive appraisal through the repetition of the emotion filled lexis “exciting” which creates a feeling of hopefulness across the text. The turning point of the narrative can be heard in the line that captures togetherness “someone that I think is walking the same path as me.”

As a result of this experience of being understood and having a compadre with whom he can work with, he feels energized and hopeful. So, I think it is renewing experience and it is an energizing experience, I know like for me individually, it’s been a way of doing a tremendous amount of learning and making connections. And I think the nature of this work it is easy to lose hope and feel disenfranchised. This is the day, at least, I personally walk out kind of feeling the opposite, that is more hopeful and it is neat seeing a variety of different pieces at work, you can kind of imagine that collective web a little bit more than I did coming to day, which is great.

In this reflection, he juxtaposes the disenfranchised individual teacher against a “collective web” of teachers at the conference. His use of the phrases “seeing a variety of different pieces at work” and “you can kind of imagine” demonstrate that being in this space helps him to expand his imagination beyond the classroom to changing social structures across the state. Indeed, he reflected on how the conference represents the kind of “coordinated and collaborative effort” that it will take to “put some focus on structural aspects” of social justice. This was a common sentiment in the interviews. For example, another educator stated, I think the really important part is, there is all of us being in the same room together, and acknowledging each other’s existence, and knowing we were there, because I think a lot of times, we all think, it’s like us VS the world, and this is this big insurmountable thing. So, for me, it is a reminder that I *do* know all of these organizations and that we were all in this together. We have this network that is really powerful.

*Teacher/Activist with Arts Organization: “Help Make the Teachers’ Job Easier”*

The following is a narrative from a community based arts educator who represents a hybrid position between “educator” and “activist.” And I know that our ability to contribute is limited in the sense that we aren’t on the frontlines. We aren’t in the schools all the time. So, what I hope that we are able to contribute is, just the additional resources, support, and encouragement, materials that can just help make the teachers’ jobs a little bit easier. And also, our mission and our passion, and our work is around poetry and I think, when you think of a lot of poets across the world. Many of them died because they were poets, they were speaking out for social justice causes and things like that. Like, if you think about Neruda, if you think of Federico García Lorca in Spain. So, I think that our art form has a lot that it can offer to the field of social justice, and I hope that that’s something that teachers find valuable also. And they want, that they find valuable and that our participation in this way is actually helpful to them.

In this narrative, we hear how she first expresses a feeling of limitation by acknowledging that her work is not ‘on the frontlines’, in the schools. However, she appeals to what we see as a solidarity support network that is necessary to “help make the teachers’ job a little bit easier,” in this case, through art. She also shows the need for reciprocity when she hopes “that teachers find (their contribution) valuable.” Her narrative incorporates the idea that social justice work is not easy and can be risky at times.

She finds the conference an opportunity to learn more about and from teachers. She reflected on an interaction she had with three white teachers who teach African American girls. They had attended a workshop focused on legacies led by African American youth and were affected personally by what they learned. They reported that this “more nuanced and deeper understanding” would help them to treat people differently in their daily life in classrooms. Witnessing the teachers’ profound commitment to their students was eye-opening to her and helped her to see the building of solidarity in action. In this next excerpt she positions herself within a community of

social justice educators. Being a part of (“Hi!” greets someone who walks by in the hallway) continually growing group of mindful, thoughtful, practitioners, that care not only about social justice, but about children and understand and are committed to like the connections, relationships, or integration of education and community. And how those things are completely inseparable. You can’t untangle them. And I like seeing every year, its bigger, so it’s very heartening.

This narrative portrays a common theme found across the interviews: the connection and interdependence of the social justice network that the ESJ conference mobilizes. She emphasizes the integration of “education and community. And how those things are “completely inseparable.” She also recognizes the “continually growing” nature of the network which is bigger every year. Her narrative is filled with positive affect and reflects the feeling of hope and encouragement that was common across participants.

## Discussion

The conference has offered a window to understand wider social and political processes and coalition building associated with educational justice (Campano, Ghiso, & Welch, 2016). We have illustrated the dual focus on the moment-to-moment actions that characterize community based social justice education as well as the longer-term conditions of forming networks of solidarity and equity. From a transformative activist perspective (Stetensko, 2017), contributing to the conference builds leadership for social justice. As people contribute—fundraise, design programs, invite workshop speakers, make signs, present a workshop or table display—they are learning and engaging skills and strategies necessary for social justice movements.

Indeed, as educators reflected on their experience, we found common discursive moves across the different narratives that can help to explain the elements necessary to build a strong solidarity network. First, educational leaders and activists recognized social struggles that were common to members of the community. Second, we found the narratives were infused with themes related to connection and interdependence that comes from being a part of a network of social justice educators. Finally, educators’ discourse practices were infused with feelings of hope and regeneration. These kinds of experiences and practice accumulate into more durable narratives of agency, which in turn, are part of social movements for educational liberation.

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