Published on *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education* (https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu)

SUPPORTING NEW VISIONS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE TEACHING: THE POTENTIAL FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORKS

Anne Burns Thomas

Abstract:
Although teaching for social justice is a widely recognized goal of many teacher education programs, there are few supports for new teachers who wish to continue this kind of practice. In this article, I discuss the ways that a group of four new teachers found flexible support for developing a vision of teaching for social justice through participation in a teacher professional development network. In a context of political upheaval and wide-sweeping reforms, the new teachers planned and executed an event that celebrated the capabilities and talents of all children. Although this event had roots in the traditions of the professional development network, the new teachers brought certain generational specific concerns to their vision of social justice teaching, particularly around questions of action and audience. Exploring the ways that new teachers are supported to teach for social justice has implications for teacher education programs, teacher retention efforts, and professional development.

Teaching for social justice is understood in a range of ways by teachers, teacher educators, activists, and researchers. The diversity of perspectives about this issue reinforces the argument that a flexible approach to supporting teaching for social justice has the power to transform work in schools. A brief review of recent literature about teaching for social justice finds definitions of teaching for social justice that include elements of improving schooling for racially, culturally, and linguistically different students (Cooper, 2006); teachers who are committed to improving social inequity (Poplin & Rivera, 2005); taking an anti-racist, pro-justice stance in the classroom (Mitchie, 2003); and a commitment to helping students to change the world in which they live (Salas, Tenorio, Walters & Weiss, 2004). Ayers (1998) argues that a vision of social justice teaching is even more complicated by context; he contends,

> Teaching for social justice demands a dialectical stance: one eye firmly fixed on the students – Who are they? What are their hopes, dreams, and aspirations? Their passions and commitments? What skills, abilities, and capacities does each one bring to the classroom? – and the other eye looking unblinkingly at the concentric circles of context – historical flow, cultural surround, economic reality. (xvii)

Given these complicated understandings, how are new teachers supported to teach for social justice? Research abounds with teacher education programs committed to ideals of social justice teaching (Cochran Smith et al., 1999; Mitchie, 2003; Kaufman & McDonald, 1995; Zeichner et al., 1998) but once a new teacher is in the first years of a career in the classroom, what supports are there to continue the development of this vision?

The issue of supporting new teachers in work for social justice is further complicated by the difficult situations facing many new teachers. There are estimates that as many as one third of all new teachers resign in the first three years of teaching (Nield et. al, 2003; Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2002), a figure which is even worse in urban school districts (Nield et. al, 2003, Useem, 2002). Recent research has demonstrated the overwhelmingly negative educational, financial, and operational impact (Brown, 2002; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2002) that the high turnover rate among teachers has on the quality of teaching and learning in urban areas. The high rate of turnover is attributed to several factors, including a lack of preparation, frustration with working conditions, and feelings of futility (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). The juxtaposition of the goals of teaching for social justice and the stark realities facing new teachers argues for support for new teachers that echoes Ayers' call for a "dialectical stance," one that recognizes the challenges new teachers face while encouraging visions of teaching for change.

In this article, I describe the experiences of four new teachers working in the School District of Philadelphia who were supported to teach for social justice through their involvement in the Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative (PTLC), a professional development network. Through the course of a school year that was marked by a social and political climate that denigrated urban students, teachers, and schools, the four new teachers were able to envision and realize an event that celebrated the potential of their students to create and learn. Through a year long practitioner inquiry study focusing on four new teachers (including myself), I was able to see the ways in which we echoed Ayers' call to remain committed to knowing and educating children while steeped in the surrounding context; these new teachers were provided support that enabled them to make a statement about the kind of schooling children deserve. The experiences of these four new teachers are instructive for those

concerned with teaching for social justice because they demonstrate the ways in which networks and other organizations can provide foundational ideas and flexible support for this important work. In addition to the social justice implications, the experiences of the new teachers in this study points to the relationship between many of the elements of a social justice approach to teaching and teacher retention, a serious problem for many school districts.

Understanding teaching for social justice

The dimensions of teaching for social justice are multiple and overlapping, and in relation to teaching and work in schools, take on other complicated nuances. Definitions of work for social justice are, by nature, constantly partial and emerging. However complicated the process of defining social justice is, it is important to locate our understandings of the concepts within a broader framework, in order to situate the conversation. Here, my understandings of teaching for social justice are informed by the duality, the overlapping contexts described by Ayers (1998) in the earlier section and echoed in feminist theory. In designing this study, conducted as dissertation research, I was conscious of the multiple positions that I held as a teacher, researcher, participant, and observer; the decision to engage in practitioner research reflected my understanding of the importance of paying close attention to power dynamics in both the local and global contexts. In this section, I describe the underpinnings of my framework for social justice in feminist and critical pedagogy as well as the methodology of practitioner inquiry that grounded this study.

This framework is in line with the feminist contention that "movements for social justice must work simultaneously on questions of social and economic structures, and at the very same time, on critical educational practices in schools and communities, for and with youth" (Weis & Fine, 1993, p. 6). Thus positioned as working on both the immediate context and the larger picture, teachers who embrace this conception of teaching for social justice are engaging on two levels simultaneously. In her study of the history and traditions of the teacher network involved in this study, Abu El-Haj (2003) described PTLC as deeply feminist because of the ways that the group's processes encourage teachers to act in the world as it is without losing sight of the world as it might be. Rather than focusing on the work of teaching in the classroom or the work of educating outside the system, in this framework, teaching for social justice necessarily involves both kinds of actions.

In addition to the commonalities with feminist research, this understanding of teaching for social justice draws on the work of critical theorists, specifically, the work of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy's commitment to exploring social inequities and relationships of power in educational settings (Maclaren, 1989) is echoed both in the framework that grounds this study and the design of the study as practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 1993). Practitioner inquiry positions the teacher as researcher, disrupting the traditional power relationships associated with research about schools and teachers. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1999) argue for an understanding of practitioner inquiry that takes into consideration the ways that

> teachers work together to develop and alter their questions and interpretive frameworks informed not only by thoughtful consideration of the immediate situation and the particular students they teach but also by the multiple contexts in which they work. (p.291)

In this way, the design of the study echoes feminist understandings of teaching for social justice while embodying critical pedagogy's call for a close look at the unequal power relationships associated with educational research. As a teacher who was researching my participation in an external network in order to ask questions about the nature of support for new teachers to develop a conception of teaching for social justice, I attempted to embody the call to work for change in both spheres – the immediate and the larger context.

The ways in which the feminist and critical pedagogy roots of this framework were enacted through the data collection and analysis stages of the study included elements which challenged the power relationships associated with research and advocated for an understanding of inquiry that was collaborative and collegial. This manifested through qualitative research methods which focused on the experiences of teachers in the professional development network, a realm outside of schools that is not typically associated with the "work" of teaching. By focusing on teachers' participation in an external network, I attempted to reinforce the conception of social justice teaching that views practice as what happens both in the classroom and in the larger context. In addition to this decision, I used recursive structures for data collection and analysis that continually positioned the teachers and myself in my study as meaning-makers (Burns Thomas, 2004). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) describe the important lens that practitioners bring to data analysis as a truly "emic" perspective, and also argue for the importance of teachers' collaborating on research and theorizing. The design of the study allowed for a close examination of multiple contexts in which the new teachers worked and developed visions of social justice teaching; in the following section, I describe the dual contexts of the School District of Philadelphia and Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative, and the ways in which each of these contexts helped to shape the teachers' work.

Context – district and network

Conversations about what was wrong with the public schools in Philadelphia dominated our city during the fall of 2001. In response to an extremely complicated web of factors including "considerable financial and academic woes" (Gewertz, 2002), the school district had been taken over by the state, a decision which included plans to privatize the operation of district administration and over forty schools. This controversial decision prompted fierce debate about the nature of education in the city, debate which often painted "these students" or "these teachers" in broad, unflattering brushstrokes loaded with depressing numbers and images of failure. Editorials branded students as "failing," numerous references to studies about the lack of quality teachers clogged daily newspapers, and officials hired to guide the reform process labeled the entire system "sick" or even in "cardiac arrest" (Clines, 2002). The highly contested nature of teaching and learning in schools that were reconstituted by the district, or taken over by a private, for-profit company, resulted in a mandated, highly scripted curriculum accompanied by professional development designed to help teachers implement the requirements and teach to proficiency on state and local assessments.

This political context translated into supports for new teachers geared toward compliance and implementation of the district curriculum, including a mandatory induction program. The induction program, designed to introduce all new teachers to the way things work in the School District of Philadelphia, focused primarily on delivery of a predetermined knowledge base for success in teaching, which included such topics as diversity, special needs learners, assessment, and the use of data to inform curriculum development (School District of Philadelphia Documents, 2002). At the same time, new teachers were exposed to the model of teacher-as-trainer which marked most professional development they would encounter through the district; teacher-coaches implemented scripts about best practice that left little room for questioning and did not acknowledge any variation of practice based on student needs or school culture (fieldnotes, 2001-2002). Little to no attention was paid to the ideas of teaching for social justice in these induction sessions (This was especially ironic given the numerous opportunities for reflection provided by the induction program itself.).

This challenging climate for new teachers marked by a contentious reform and privatization effort and an induction program designed to ensure compliance was hardly the ideal environment to cultivate an approach to teaching for social justice. However, there were education related groups and causes in Philadelphia that had a long history of activism and advocacy operating in the same context. The Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative (PTLC) was one such group; a professional development network that has been meeting weekly since 1978 during after school time in the homes of members to engage in "formal discussions" about students, teaching, classrooms, and other issues (PTLC, 1984). PTLC shares these characteristics of a teacher network: a collaborative atmosphere, the multiple perspectives of members, and a strong contextual nature (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). The structure and activities of PTLC are developed out of the work of Patricia Carini and the Prospect Archives and Center for Education and Research (Carini 2001), including processes that have been designed to facilitate careful inquiry about children, children's work, and classrooms.

Although there is no formal mission or statement of membership associated with PTLC, the network is clearly supportive of teaching for social justice as it has been defined here and elsewhere. Members of PTLC identify the Descriptive Processes as activism, for the ways that this work positions teachers as researchers and children and families as positive actors in the school system (Kanevsky, 2000; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). In addition to this understanding, several times throughout the network's history, individuals or small groups of members would work on a project of activism together (Kanevsky, 2000). PTLC was created independent of the school district, with no ties to the central administration for funding or resources; as such, the network has been free to define a flexible relationship with the School District of Philadelphia administration that has run the gamut from engaged conversation to distanced critique. During 2001-2002, the school district administration was in such constant upheaval that, although several meetings were devoted to exploring ways to engage with the district reforms, there were no clear points of entry into dialogue, critique, or other engagement (fieldnotes, 2001).

As a cooperative, PTLC has flexible understandings of membership. Teachers might regularly attend every weekly meeting of the network in addition to planning the schedule and acting as meeting presenters, or another member might attend one to two meetings per year and take on no additional responsibilities. Throughout the network's history, there have been intermittent attempts to recruit members and publicize the groups' efforts, but more often than not, new members are attracted through word of mouth. I was introduced to PTLC through an advisor in graduate school, and after being impressed by the ways in which the members talked about teaching for social justice, began to attend meetings. In identifying other teachers for the study, I relied on research about teacher retention and supporting new teachers which characterizes the problem as significant during the first three years of teaching (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Peske et. al, 2001); the four new teachers in this study all had less than three years of experience at the beginning of the 2001 school year, and would thus be representative of this critical time in a teaching career.

The other three new teachers – Caroline, Allie, and Kim – in this study came to PTLC for various reasons, including frustration

with the disconnect between what we had learned in our teacher preparation programs and the context in which we were teaching (fieldnotes, 2001). Caroline was a Special Education Inclusion teacher who was teaching a unique class of struggling 7, 8, and 9 year olds during the year of the study. Allie was a Kindergarten teacher who had come to teaching from a career in social work, a move that she connected to a desire to work more closely with families and children. Kim had been a first grade teacher but during the year of my study, left the classroom out of frustration with her school and principal; she remained committed to public education and participated in PTLC (and this study) as a graduate student in teacher education. As the last of the four teachers in this practitioner inquiry study, I was teaching middle school language arts at an academic magnet school in Philadelphia. In our own ways, we found support through PTLC for developing a conception of teaching for social justice (For a more thorough analysis of the ways in which PTLC offered support, see Burns Thomas, 2004).

Although PTLC enjoyed a reputation as a network of progressive teachers (which has its own political and social justice implications) it was not a network that was designed to promote a particular form of activism or particular understandings of teaching for social justice. However, the fusion of the climate of reform in the School District of Philadelphia, the new teachers' participation in PTLC and the personal backgrounds of the new teachers created a flexible context for meaningful social justice teaching. As a "moment," it is unlikely that this confluence of events and circumstances will be repeated or that lessons can be learned in order to replicate the example on a larger scale. What can be learned from the experiences of these four new teachers concerns the importance of context and flexible support to the development of personally meaningful understandings of teaching for social justice. Through a careful study of the experiences of these four new teachers, we can understand more about the ways that other new teachers might develop their own understandings, and what can be done to support a process of development that centrally locates the importance of the local and global context.

During this year of political upheaval in Philadelphia, important voices of critical actors in the education process, including teachers, students, and parents were often silenced. As the new teachers in this study came together, we sought ways to expand the conversation about our children and our schools. To look closely at the ways that new teachers engaged in this work, I begin the following sections with a description of the planning process and ultimate incarnation of the new teachers' vision of social justice teaching, the Celebration of Children's Work. Next, I describe the PTLC practices which the new teachers were able to take up as the foundation for their vision of social justice teaching as well as the important ways in which this event deviated from PTLC practices and traditions, marking it as a creation of the intersection between network practices and the new teachers' beliefs.

The Celebration of Children's Work

As the new teachers participated in weekly PTLC meetings and group interviews for this research project, we expressed a general sense of unease and futility in the face of the proposed takeover and privatization of Philadelphia schools. Allie shared stories of her increasingly mandated kindergarten curriculum, which prohibited dramatic play and time to explore materials in favor of large blocks of directive reading and math instruction. Caroline spoke of the proposed closure of her school and the impending transfer of students to a large, new school building that was stuffed full of students and plagued by violence (fieldnotes, 2001). Although local unions, including the highly visible and active Student Union, scheduled protests and organized collective action, these events were sparsely attended for the most part and seemed disconnected from the work in schools that was being maligned and threatened by the proposed reforms. Through a series of informal conversations and PTLC meetings about planning a response to the proposed reforms, the new teachers began to develop the idea to bring together our students for an out of school experience that affirmed their talents and abilities while providing a statement to the larger community about what kind of work we valued in schools.

The planning process for the proposed event was reflective of the larger relationship between the new teachers and more experienced members of PTLC during the year of my study. As I describe elsewhere (Burns Thomas, 2004), the ways in which the new teachers were accepted and encouraged, while simultaneously silenced and critiqued, led to the development of a dialectic style of engagement where the new teachers were working within the traditions of PTLC while also struggling against those same structures that tended to control and limit their involvement. The following fieldnotes of an exchange during an early planning meeting demonstrate the use of the network's traditional oral inquiry processes to explore a new concept; in this, the earliest discussion of the idea behind the Celebration, grounding principles and values of PTLC are clearly present:

> Anne: There's this other idea, this idea that Caroline was talking about the other night. You should say more about it but it was kind of like this gallery of kid's work, or a children's art show.
>
> Caroline: I thought about it as a way for us to bring our classrooms together – an art show of kids work around a theme. It would be like space for Project Time and we could have a big opening and bring our kids to it.
>
> Diane: We could also have photos of learning and play – like block building for example – to educate the public.

Caroline: It is a way for us to work together on things that are bigger than us. It would be like my kids inviting other kids into the classroom.

Kim: We could also have quotes from Pat's [Carini] book around the room to connect to the work.

Rachel: Things kids say about their work – we should have their voices along with it. It's a way to say that we are proud of the work of students in Philadelphia schools.

Kim: We can have teachers' voices too, both teachers as artists and teachers explaining how they do this in their classroom.

Caroline: My kids are dancers, singers, and there needs to be a place for that. One question that I have is should we open this up to other teachers outside of PTLC?

Rachel: The attitude of others is that our schools have failed. We don't celebrate what happens in our schools that is good. These schools can work. We need to plan out what we want the show to say, to embody.

Lori: What happens when we are bullied about Philadelphia public schools? We should have a meeting about how we stand up to that as part of the planning for this event.

Sharon: This is getting very complicated. It all started out as Caroline's simple idea about working together to see each others' kids' work. (Fieldnotes, 11/29/01).

Although I will return to this conversation in later sections to analyze the roots of PTLC traditions as well as the ways in which the new teachers moved to make the event into something different and more reflective of their understandings of social justice teaching, I include this excerpt here because it indicates the development of the idea behind the event. Moving from a small wish to bring together our students to see each others' work to a large scale project designed to make a political statement about the kind of work that our students were capable of resonates with the vision of social justice teaching put forth by Ayers (1998) and others which remains rooted in the realities of the child and classroom while fixed on the larger context at the same time.

The result of this planning process, The Celebration of Children's Work, was a two-day event that brought together over 300 students from seven different elementary and middle schools, created through the efforts of an entirely volunteer planning staff with a next to nothing budget. The program flyer for the Celebration announced the overall plan for the event, including brief descriptions of the kinds of activities that would be available:

> The Celebration will offer visitors the opportunity to make, do, and write through several different activity areas, including construction with blocks, making books, and creating a mural. There will be several performances throughout the day. Feel free to come for scheduled performances [Times listed below] or for the whole day's activities. (Brochure, 2002)

The event held at a local art college was planned as a two-day program with distinctly different audiences and purposes. Friday, the first day, was envisioned as "one big field trip" (fieldnotes, 5/30/02) that would bring together the classes of nine PTLC teachers from five different schools to engage in a wide range of activities and attend two student performances. (Table I provides a description of some of the activity tables to provide a sense of the range of experiences available. I believe that this table is important because it illustrates the wide range of experiences and materials that were planned for the day. This reflects a foundational PTLC belief in the importance of provisioning for children's learning and, as such, is important to the later analysis.) The roughly 250 students who attended the Friday event were able to move among more than 15 activity tables that were staffed by students, parent chaperones, and some teachers. The students ate lunch in two shifts, and made use of a small green space outdoors to play tag and jump rope. Once in the auditorium, students participated in a sing along with two PTLC teachers leading call and response songs and chants, saw a play based on a famous children's story, and watched Caroline's drama club perform an original musical called "On Being Me."

The Saturday component was open to children and adults from the entire city (although it was not publicized) and featured the same activities, the musical performance, and two different presentations, including one by a local puppet theater. In addition to a continuation of the activities from Friday's collaborative work, the Saturday portion was pictured as an opportunity to showcase the student work that was created the previous day and in PTLC classrooms throughout the school year. In planning the distinction between the two days, we argued that it was important because, "The Celebration of Children's Work makes visible the works that young people create in our classrooms. The wide body of work is vivid and powerful when seen as a collection. We welcome this opportunity to present our students' painting, construction, drawing, drama, poetry, songs, and sculptures" (Brochure, 2002).

Table 1: Description of Activities at Celebration of Children's Work

Activity	Description
Art corner	Long strips of paper and a variety of colored pencils, markers, stamps, ink pads, scissors, and glue. Was facilitated on Friday by a "professional artist" who came with a friend.
Ball toss making	Directions for making a ball toss game with paper plate cones, string, and plastic ping pong balls. Also provisioned with markers so that students could decorate and personalize the products.
Book making	Provisioned with considerable supplies from PTLC teachers personal stores including: over ten different varieties of paper and wall paper, books with instructions for making different varieties, fancy scissors, sample books made by students at two schools.
Bubble blowing	In the atrium, gallons of homemade bubble soap and at least 15 varieties of bubble wand and pipe along with cards listing questions about the science of bubbles.
Construction with Blocks	Large wooden blocks, lightweight brick-type blocks, smaller block sets including arch and pyramid. Set up to the back of other activities with a large cushioned mat.
Games	Chess, checkers, Trouble, Monopoly, and several teacher created games were spread along one side of the wall and several tables.
Mask making	A table with provisions beneath examples of masks made in PTLC teachers' classrooms. Provisions included paper plates, scissors, hole punches, construction paper, feathers, beads, and other decorations.
Mural/quilt	Pentagonal squares cut from paper plates were given to each child to create a quilt square that was then connected using twist ties through holes punched in the sides.

Pipe cleaner dolls	A long table with provisions for creating pipe cleaner dolls and examples of these simple creations. Materials included pipe cleaners, scraps of fabric, beads, feathers, yarn, and felt.
Puppet corner	A puppet theater with marionettes and hand puppets. Several costumes for students to try on. Also, instructions and provisions for making simple stick puppets.
Reading Corner	A selection of books written by children and by favorite children's authors. Boxes of books were clustered around large floor pillows and some individual books were displayed.
Sign language video	Videotape of a sign language project conducted as part of the 4th grade interdisciplinary project required by the district. The video showed students demonstrating different signs, including the alphabet.
Silkworms	A box of silkworms and mulberry leaves that students were encouraged to examine and touch.
Student initiated activities	Spanish lessons, Vietnamese lessons, tap dancing lessons, two roaming clowns, mime demonstrations,
Tattoo tables	An impromptu table created for only Friday of the Celebration with older students creating tattoos with makeup pencils

Some may look upon this description without understanding the ways that the events that were scheduled should be considered teaching, let alone social justice teaching. However, to teachers being instructed to abandon creativity both for student projects and in their own teaching (through the use of scripted lesson plans and mandated curricula), the inclusion of chances for children to make, do, explore, and show off was clearly a political statement. To further animate the description of The Celebration of Children's Work, I offer the following excerpt from my journal that describes the involvement of my students and the ways in which I understood the day to be an instantiation of teaching for social justice.

> *As we left [school], I had no idea what the day would have in store for me, for my students, or for the other teachers and kids who were coming to the Celebration of Children's Work. I didn't even have any idea who would be there or what would be happening when we arrived at [the local] College of Art. Yet, we left anyway, and I walked back and forth along my string of eighth grade students walking down 17th Street, asking groups along the way if they were sure of their jobs, knew what they were going to do once we arrived. I guess I thought that if they knew, if they were sure, then we would be okay. . . The day was glorious – beautifully sunny, filled with creative activities and unique performances, crowded with faces of children both engaged and happy – and really was a statement about teaching and learning far greater than anything I had heard all year. The range of play and choice that we had set up for the kids helped them to shine. I saw Michael, a boy who never interacted with the other kids in the class or any of his teachers, smile for the first time in the two years that I taught him. Raashida, Ashley, and Erika ran the "tattoo" table like seasoned veterans, keeping order in the line and asking for the younger kids' ideas and suggestions. Drew and Justin made pipe cleaner dolls for themselves and everyone else who came remotely close to them and James dug into the silkworms that were brought by his former Kindergarten teacher. My students got to meet their pen pals, got to play jump rope and tag with Allie's Kindergarten, and I got to see them in a new light. At the end of the day, we walked back to school, this time with me leading the way to the corner ice cream stand for a treat; the kids were so exhausted that they could barely keep their heads off the desks in our room. This felt really right for me, like what school should feel like.*(Journal, 5/10/02).

These descriptions of The Celebration of Children's Work point to a vision of social justice teaching that embraced the traditions

of PTLC, the network that supported the new teachers to engage in this kind of work, yet also embraced new ideas and understandings that were the result of the new teachers' backgrounds. In the next section, I explore some of the foundational ideas, such as the importance of provisioning for students learning and the emphasis on the ability of students to create. Following this analysis, I highlight the ways in which the new teachers brought new and different elements to this event, including the idea of action or performance as protest.

Foundational ideas from PTLC

Support for new teachers to develop a vision and practice of social justice teaching in PTLC was deeply rooted in the design and shared beliefs of this professional development network. Social justice teaching, as practiced by the members of PTLC, took on many shapes and forms, including what is commonly associated with constructivist or progressive theories of education (Carini, 2001). Although there was no explicitly activist or social justice stance expressed by members of the network, there were central beliefs and operating procedures that highlighted opportunities to think about teaching from a viewpoint that was starkly different than that encouraged by the official School District of Philadelphia policies. For example, meetings that made use of the Descriptive Processes developed by Patricia Carini and colleagues at the Prospect School devoted much attention to the strengths and possibilities of each child (Carini, 2001; Kanevsky, 2000; fieldnotes, 2001) and to the number and choice of materials for classrooms (fieldnotes, 2001). As the new teachers developed the Celebration of Children's Work as an event that would highlight the strengths and talents of students in our schools, these two foundational ideas grounded the vision of teaching for social justice.

In the first planning conversation, the importance of showcasing powerful and creative examples of work that children in our classes was doing emerged. Caroline's earliest idea was some kind of "art show" or "gallery" where interested visitors could see examples of the kind of work that children in Philadelphia schools were engaged in. This idea builds on one of the centerpieces of the Descriptive Processes as enacted by PTLC: the Descriptive Review of Children's Work. In this process, a presenting teacher would convene a meeting to look closely at samples of work from one student or a range of work from a classroom around one assignment (Carini, 2001; Kanevsky, 2000). The Descriptive Review of Children's Work is based in the belief that through collaborative description and discussion of the work that children do in school, much can be learned about the child, the classroom, the teacher, and the school (Carini, 1987). Naming these processes as teacher inquiry, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) contend, "By participating in these experiences, teachers grapple with children's meaning as expressed in their projects and with the varied meanings that their colleagues find in these" (p. 32). As the seed of the idea for the Celebration of Children's Work, the inclusion of art to display to the public reflected the idea that there was meaning and value to what children were doing in schools, even, and perhaps especially, work that fell outside the limited expectations of the mandated curriculum and assessment driven culture of schools.

Following from this early idea, the new teachers in PTLC began to envision an event where children would actively engage in the making and doing of a range of creative "work" as an additional statement against the limited visions of Philadelphia's school children that were part of the reform conversation. Caroline said, "My kids are dancers, singers, and there needs to be a place for that," calling to mind another idea embraced by PTLC about understanding the student, or the child, through a full picture of strengths and talents, academic and otherwise (fieldnotes, 2001). This began the development of the range of activities that took place at the Celebration of Children's Work, all with roots in the classrooms of PTLC members. Once the decision was made to bring students from our classrooms together to engage in creating masks, plays, books, and in showcasing their talents in art, reading, science, and performance, the full social justice implications of the day emerged. The choice to include these activities in the Celebration was firmly rooted in progressive practices of PTLC teachers, including the provisioning of a wide range of materials. The range of stations available to students was also connected to the practice of choice time, widely embraced by PTLC teachers and discouraged by current School District of Philadelphia policies. The practice of encouraging students to make choices and follow personal interests with some portion of their work time embraced a view of children that was clearly positive and different than the norm at that time. The foundational ideas that the new teachers found through participation in this professional development network highlighted the ways that this work was necessary and possible. The new teachers could believe in the feasibility of planning this event because there were experienced teachers who had done these things, who shared these beliefs, who would provide support. More than simply "mentors" of the kind assigned by many school districts to ensure new teachers' compliance, the other teachers in the professional development network served as inspiration and as further evidence of what might be possible. In this way, the professional development network provided a unique kind of flexible support that helped the new teachers to act in the world as it was while creating a vision of the world as they believed it should be.

This event as envisioned by the new teachers, would, as Ayers argues, keep one eye firmly on the students by providing an opportunity to engage in creative activities in a beautiful setting with other students from different schools, while engaging the political context by making a statement about a vision of school that all children deserve and an image of students as creative and capable. The statement and the vision were informed by the new teachers' participation in PTLC, both in the range of activities offered for students to participate in and in the understanding of children's work as a statement with a political purpose. As the following section demonstrates, the new teachers brought certain generational specific experiences of activism with them

to the teacher network which contributed to the enactment of a vision of teaching for social justice through the Celebration of Children's Work.

New teachers' visions

The ways in which this event was planned and executed reflected a belief in the potential of all students and the importance of plentiful materials and choice in the classroom, which were long associated with the teaching of PTLC members. In addition to these foundational ideas about social justice teaching that they received through network participation, the new teachers brought a generational specific understanding of activism that was influenced by their participation in service-learning programs. It was the combination of two supportive communities – the long-standing teacher network and a subsection of new teachers within that network – that allowed the new teachers to develop a personal vision of social justice teaching. In this section, I describe the backgrounds of the new teachers and the ways in which these backgrounds called for an understanding of social justice that was concerned with action and audience. Specifically, I focus on the conflict between the new teachers' ideas of justice and those promoted by PTLC members throughout the planning of the Celebration of Children's Work.

Each of the new teachers had become interested in teaching as a form of social justice through a volunteer or service learning experience in high school or college. Caroline's family was very active in the local peace community, and she has traveled to El Salvador, Chile, and Puerto Rico on educational and service missions. Like Caroline, I was heavily involved in service learning programs through college, organizing courses which connected Spanish to local needs for translation or Business Writing with community organizations in need (Harkavay, 1996). Kim and I had both been Americorps volunteers, reflecting the embrace of a culture of young American volunteers that peaked again during the early to mid-1990s (Harkavay, 1996). Allie found her way to teaching through her work at a local synagogue with the young people's program and her time as a social worker dealing with families in crisis (fieldnotes, 2001). Even in these brief snapshots, a picture of the similar experiences and exposures that the new teachers had to service and thinking about social justice emerges. These similarities would be influential in the planning of the Celebration as a social justice event, especially in relation to action and audience.

One of the main differences that the new teachers brought to this experience from the traditional definition of activism as enacted in PTLC was clearly centered around the importance of taking action, often in conjunction with or prior to, reflection on the experience. As we participated in PTLC meetings designed to look closely at the language and policies of the reforms that were being planned for Philadelphia, the frustration at our inability to act bubbled under the surface. The main strategy of PTLC was to engage in oral inquiry through the Descriptive Processes in order to craft a response or "speak back" to the reform proposals (fieldnotes, 2001). This process, undertaken by PTLC teachers several times throughout the network's history (PTLC, 1984; Kanevsky, 2000) relied on careful, collaborative engagement that explored issues from multiple angles, but rarely included any organized action as a response. Instead, members of PTLC were encouraged to attend other organizations' protest and events; although the local teachers' union had planned marches and protests in 2001-2002, these poorly attended events had done little or nothing to change public opinion. My inclination to action was thwarted by the traditions of PTLC, as I explained to the other new teachers,

> And I guess what I meant with the question is that I am tired of complaining about it. Like my strategy with everything, with the Description of Work or the Celebration of Work, or the thing with [district administrator] is – let's have a strategy, let's fix it. And I can't imagine why I'm not trying that with PTLC, but I [haven't]. (Conversation, 1.20.02)

Through our subgroup meetings and conversations, the new teachers came to realize that taking action in PTLC would be difficult because of the expectations and traditions of the network; we began to think about ways to move past the network and take action on our own that would make a statement. This emphasis on action by the new teachers moves our definition of working for social justice parallel to Freire's (1970/2000) idea of critical consciousness; he states, "Once man perceives a challenge, understands it, and recognizes the possibilities of response, he acts. The nature of that action corresponds to the nature of his understanding. Critical understanding leads to critical action…" (p.44). The action that the new teachers took in planning and realizing the Celebration of Children's Work was central to our perception of the challenge, or the political context that we understood through PTLC inquiry using Descriptive Processes. In the past, PTLC response might include seeking a meeting with a district administrator or crafting a written response to some reforms, but given the new teachers' experiences, action came to mean something else entirely. Once we identified that the possible forms of response working within PTLC tradition did not fit with our experiences and backgrounds, we acted by creating a new vision of social justice.

The second area where the new teachers brought a different understanding to the event was related to questions of audience.

The audience for the Celebration of Children's Work was intended to be the students, parents, teachers, and friends who were participating in the day; the people who would make the books, dress the dolls, draw the pictures, put on the plays, and write the stories were meant to be the focal point of the action. The subgroup of planners, especially the new teachers, determined this audience to be important to any political response that we crafted about the district takeover and proposed privatization. Imagined in this way, the message of the day was that there were positive things going on in Philadelphia schools; teachers, students, and families can create and do great things. In part, the message was meant to affirm what the teachers and students were doing, and in part the message was meant to challenge them to do more, or craft a personal political response. The decision to define the audience in this way grew out of the new teachers' experiences with activism and our understanding of the district politics. The following excerpt from a group conversation demonstrates our ideas about audience and unwillingness to include officials from the city and school district.

> Allie: I just don't want it to be about what someone else wants to see, like who do I care to show off my kids to? That's really…really what I don't want, like one of those things where you invite all these dignitaries and then they don't come and it is all depressed.
>
> Kim: I always think that is so fake anyway [laughs] like they've up there with this big smile on and you're thinking, right…you don't even know why you are here. This is more about the people who know what we are saying by having kids do this. (transcript, 1/30/02)

However, this view of the audience for the Celebration of Children's Work was not shared by all of the members of PTLC; more experienced members expressed interest in expanding the audience to district officials and the larger community through a newspaper article. At a meeting to decide some last minute logistics for the event, a founding member of PTLC attempted to send flyers to district officials and sympathetic local leaders (fieldnotes, 2002). In addition, a reporter was invited to the location to cover the event, but we never learned by whom. These moves to include representatives who might "learn something" about our students and schools were made by PTLC members who understood social justice teaching in a more traditional way than the new teachers did. Our understanding of audience was local and participatory; the Celebration was planned as an event for teachers, parents, and students who were the targets of the reform strategies and the harsh judgments. We resisted explanations that would draw in district officials and the larger population through catchy slogans ("Our children are super!") or instructions ("By building with blocks, Amanda is showing that she understands spatial relationships.").

The two main areas of difference between the new teachers' vision of social justice teaching manifested in questions of action and audience. The decisions to take action and to narrow the audience for the Celebration to the teachers, students, and parents who would participate in the day's shows and activities demonstrated the ways in which this new vision differed from traditional PTLC visions of social justice teaching. In making these choices, the new teachers in this study refused to reduce the meaning of the event to terms palatable by district administrators or officials: we would not spell out what the Celebration meant as a response to the district reforms, but would offer it up as an image of the possible to fortify those who were engaged in struggle against the inevitable.

Support for visions of social justice teaching

The ways in which the four new teachers in this study were supported to develop a personal vision of teaching for social justice which manifested in a collective event calls for understandings of support for new teachers that are flexible, context driven, and reflective of teacher's identities. These characteristics of the kinds of support that will enable new teachers to work for social justice have important implications for teacher education programs, teacher retention efforts and professional development. For teacher education programs with a social justice focus, developing formal and informal networks for graduates may protect new teachers from the disillusionment that many feel when faced with challenging situations. Taking a lesson from the experiences of the four new teachers in this study, the networks need not be geared toward any one approach to teaching, but should provide support for teacher inquiry. As in the case of PTLC, a network that offers new teachers the opportunity to engage in inquiry about work in classrooms and schools can encourage new teachers to enact their views about social justice teaching.

The kinds of support offered by large scale supports for new teachers such as induction programs and dictated mentoring relationships are part of what Feiman-Nemser (1998) calls the "omnibus" approach to retaining new teachers. Organized by the state or local school district, these programs are often geared toward new teacher compliance with district strategies and have been found to have little impact or success at helping new teachers (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Indeed, in Philadelphia during the year of this study, new teachers were attending meetings of the induction program with serious concerns and questions about the future of the school district and the proposed takeover of their schools. Due to the focus on scripted lesson plans and the obsession with transmitting information about the mandated curriculum, these questions and concerns were ignored or pushed aside (fieldnotes, 2001). This resulted in teachers feeling helpless, a condition which many link to the high rate of turnover

among new teachers (Nieto, 2001). In contrast, the kind of support to ask questions and to look closely at the proposed reforms through PTLC encouraged the new teachers in this study to find their voice and enact a vision of social justice teaching. Rather than feeling powerless, these new teachers defined what power they would showcase for themselves and their students, leading to a vision of social justice teaching that privileged a local and participatory audience.

Finally, the experiences of the new teachers in this study speaks to the need for flexible, inquiry driven professional development for new teachers that takes into account their backgrounds and identities. Even a professional development network such as PTLC can discourage innovation and personal expression due to a reliance on tradition, but the flexible understanding of membership made possible a smaller subgroup of teachers with similar backgrounds. The possibilities for teaching for social justice include elements that are both immediate and long term, both local and part of a broader context. Through participation in a professional development network, these four new teachers were able to envision and create an event that captured their interest in both of these realms, one that celebrated the students they were teaching while making a statement about the importance of remembering to celebrate these students in the broader sphere of education discourse.

Works Cited

Abu el-Haj, T. (2003). Practicing for equity from the standpoint of the particular: Exploring the work of one urban teacher network. *Teachers College Record, 105*(5), pp. 817-845.

Ayers, W. (1998). Foreword: Popular education – teaching for social justice. In W. Ayers, J.A. Hunt and T. Quinn (Eds.). *Teaching For Social Justice*. New York: The New Press & Teachers College Press.

Ayers, W., Hunt, J.A., & Quinn, T. (Eds.). (1998). *Teaching For Social Justice*. New York: The New Press & Teachers College Press.

Brown, D. (2002). *Becoming a successful urban teacher*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Burns Thomas, A. (2004). Inquiry within and against: The experiences of four new teachers in an urban professional development network. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 65*(6A), pp. 2163. (UMI NO. 3138081).

Carini, P. F. (1987). *On value in education*. New York College Workshop Center Monograph.

Carini, P. F. (2001). *starting strong: a different look at children, schools, and standards* New York: Teachers College Press

Clines, F. X. (February 4, 2002). A doctor for schools calls Philadelphia's "very sick." *New York Times*. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com on February 27, 2002.

Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. *Review of Research in Education*, *24*, pp. 249-305

Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. (1993). *Inside/Outside: Teacher research and knowledge*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Cochran-Smith, M., Albert, L., Dimattia, P., Freedman, S., Jackson, R., Mooney, J., Neisler, O., Peck, A., & Zollers, N. (1999). Seeking social justice: A teacher education faculty's self-study. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 2*(3), pp. 229-253

Cooper, C.W. (Summer 2006). Refining social justice commitments through collaborative inquiry: Key rewards and challenges for teacher educators. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 33(3), 115-132.

Feiman-Nemser, S. (2001). From preparation to practice: Designing a continuum to strengthen and sustain teaching. *Teachers College Record, 103*(6), pp. 1013-1055.

Freire, P. (1970/2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). New York: Continuum.

Gewertz, C. (January 9, 2002). It's official: State takes over Philadelphia schools.*Education Week*, 21(16), pp. 1, 14-15.

Harkavy, I. (1996). Service learning as a vehicle for revitalization of education institutions and urban communities. Paper Presented at the American Psychological Association Annual Meeting, Toronto, Canada.

Ingersoll, R. & Smith, T. (May 2003). The wrong solution to the teacher shortage problem. *Educational Leadership*, 60(8), pp. 30-34.

Kanevsky, R. (2000). Response: Questions and recommendations. In M. Himley with P. Carini (Eds.), *From another angle: Children's strengths and school standards*. New York: Teachers College Press, pp. 109-121.

Kaufman, J.S., & McDonald J.L. (1995), *Preparing Teachers to Become Agents of Change* Radical Teacher. No. 47, pp. 47-50

Lieberman, A. & Grolnick, M. (1996). Networks and reform in American education. *Teachers College Record, 98* (1), pp. 7-45.

McLaren, P. (2007). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. 5th Ed. New York: Pearson.

Michie, G. (2003). What am I supposed to do right now?: Dilemmas of a beginning teacher educator. *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue.*, 5(2), pp. 91-98

National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. (2002). *Unraveling the "teacher shortage" problem: Teacher retention is the key*. Paper presented at a Symposium of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and NCTAF State Partners, Washington, DC.

Nield, R., Useem, E., Travers, E., & Lesnick, J. (2003). *Once and for all: Placing a highly qualified teacher in very Philadelphia classroom*. Philadelphia: Research for Action.

Nieto, S. (2003). *What keeps teachers going? New York*: Teachers College Press.

Peske, H.G., Liu, E., Johnson, S., Kauffman, D., & Kardos, S. (2001, December). The next generation of teachers: Changing conceptions of a career in teaching. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *83* (4), pp. 304-311.

Philadelphia Teachers Learning Cooperative. (1984). On becoming teacher experts: Buying time. *Language Arts*, 61(7).

Poplin, M., & Rivera, J. (Winter 2005). Merging social justice and accountability: Educating qualified and effective teachers. *Theory into Practice, 44*(1), pp. 27-37.

Salas, K.D., Tenorio, R., Walters, S., & Weiss, D. (Eds.). (2004). *The New Teacher Book.* Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Rethinking Public Schools, LTD.

Stansbury, K & Zimmerman, J. (2002). Smart induction programs become lifelines for the beginning teacher. *Journal of Staff Development,* 23(4), pp. 10-17.

Useem, E. & Nield, R.C. (2002). *Teacher staffing in the School District of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Education Fund.

Weis, L. & Fine, M. (1993). *Beyond silenced voices: Class, race, and gender in United States schools.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Zeichner, K.M., Grant, C., Gay, G., Gillette, M., Valli, L., & Villegas, A.M. (Spring 1998). *A Research Informed Vision of Good*

Practice in Multicultural Teacher Education: Design Principles. Theory into Practice., 37(2), pp. 163-171

Anne Burns Thomas

Anne Burns Thomas is an assistant professor in the Foundations and Social Advocacy Department in the School of Education at SUNY College at Cortland. Additionally, she is the coordinator of Cortland's Urban Recruitment of Educators (C.U.R.E) program, a comprehensive program in urban education designed to prepare qualified teachers for the challenges of working in high need urban schools in New York state. A former middle school English teacher in Philadelphia, her research interests include the nature of support for new teachers in urban schools, teacher networks, and teacher research. Her email address is BurnsThomasA@cortland.edu.