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

EDITORIAL: TEACHER NETWORKS AND THE DRIVE FOR EQUITY

Gina Cappelletti, *University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education*

Cat McManus, *University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education*

As in the last issue, the Spring 2015 issue of *Perspectives on Urban Education* opens with what we refer to as the "Call for Response Piece." The goal of the response piece is to catalyze responses from you, our readers, as well as to spark dialogue across the issues. The last issue's response piece was entirely visual; this one is audio-only. We imagine--and indeed we hope--that your responses will take many forms and we encourage multi-modal representations of knowledge generated by education-watchers, practitioners, researchers, students, parents, and more.

Networks, equity, and marginalized groups in urban school settings

In this issue of *Perspectives*, the response piece serves as a particularly powerful bridge between the major themes running through this Philadelphia-centric issue: the importance of networks, the drive for equity, and the experiences of marginalized groups in urban school settings. As Black male educators who teach in urban contexts and who gather regularly under the banner of Penn GSE's Center for the Study of Race & Equity in Education, the voices you hear in this audio piece belong to members of a marginalized group who are addressing their work in urban communities. Their reflections mirror the arguments woven throughout this issue which illustrate the centrality of networks to teacher learning and engagement. Moreover, these interviews demonstrate the potential for networks of peers--such as the Black male educators' group--to support minority educators in particular, and to ameliorate the sense of marginality or isolation experienced by many educators. As both Riley and Schiff et al. argue in this issue, networks have the potential to support educators because they allow teachers to reclaim their identities as professionals and to connect to like-minded individuals, in the process, increasing job satisfaction and strengthening their commitment to the field.

These articles simultaneously illustrate our shared interest in improving schools in Philadelphia (and similar urban environments) and demonstrate a small collection of the many approaches to doing so. Included here are articles that champion the power of individuals to effect change, as well as those that advocate on behalf of districts as change-agents, or offer up the private sector as a solution. These approaches could easily be viewed as wildly divergent, mutually exclusive, or so politically charged as to become useless, but we believe that the approaches discussed and advocated here are not wholly incompatible. We argue that they illustrate--once again--the complexity of the endeavor we call education. Together, they suggest the value of a systems-level approach to educational improvement in which multiple forces and groups are operating, including students and teachers, as well as market, political, and social forces.

Sustaining and transforming teachers' practice

Teacher networks

The issue opens with articles that examine the role of teacher networks and practitioner inquiry in sustaining and transforming teachers' practice. First, in "Teacher Networks in Philadelphia: Landscape, Engagement, and Value" authors Schiff, Herzog, Farley-Ripple, and Thum Iannuccilli take a mixed methods approach to analyze the landscape of teacher networks in a sample of district and charter schools in Philadelphia. They find that teachers are part of a "staggering" number of networks, both formal and informal, in-school and out-of-school. Their findings support our understanding of teacher networks as providing opportunities for teachers to develop social capital and share expertise. Additionally, teacher networks are shown to have the potential to impact student achievement and to provide the support greatly needed by teachers working in challenging contexts.

Riley's "Reading for Change: Social Justice Unionism Book Groups as an Organizing Tool" and Taton's "Much more than it's cooked-up to be: Reflections on doing math and teachers' professional learning" serve as examples of teachers engaged in out-of-school networks. In these examples, teachers elect to engage in out-of-school networks out of a shared commitment to improving their practice and to elevating the the teaching profession. While Schiff et al. find that these networks "often remain out of the limelight," they are critical to teacher leadership and development. Out-of-school networks may be one mechanism for teachers to position themselves as teacher-leaders and change agents in the drive to improve urban schools.

In a keynote address presented to the 2013 and 2014 cohorts of Teach For America in Philadelphia, John F. Smith, III cautions his fellow Teach for America alumni about feeling separate from the broader education community. He calls on them to embrace their identities as teachers, making connections across perceived boundaries. His speech, as a conclusion to our teacher networks section, reinforces the value of networks which strengthen teachers' shared commitment to students and to the profession.

Practitioner inquiry

Following these articles, which illustrate teachers' engagement in out-of-school networks as a mode of professional development, we examine how teachers endeavor to transform their work from inside their own classrooms. These pieces are examples of practitioner research, which draws on the rich experiences and knowledge of teachers, calling on them to inquire into their own practice. In the first piece, Dan LaSalle, an 8th grade composition teacher and Teach for America alumni, details the evolution of his inquiry-based practitioner research on cultivating intrinsic motivation through five–paragraph essays. LaSalle makes a case for how all teachers, simply by thinking through the best ways of engaging students, motivating them, or assessing them, are conducting sophisticated social science research. A second such example is Dickerson's "Reimagining reading: Creating a classroom culture that embraces independent choice reading," which examines her two-year journey to incorporate more independent reading and more choice reading into her literacy instruction. Dickerson offers lessons learned and challenges teachers to experiment and explore with ways to increase student engagement and autonomy. The final piece in this section, written by Susan Catapano, inquires into the impact of a project-based Saturday enrichment program on learners and their attitudes about learning, finding that students who participated showed more positive attitudes about learning. The enrichment program was the result of a university-school partnership, demonstrating the significance of out-of-school networks, not only among teachers, but also between schools and universities, teachers and researchers.

Taken together, the articles on teacher networks and practitioner inquiry demonstrate the ways in which teachers--despite operating in urban contexts that sometimes feel hopeless--are able to exercise agency and take action. Taking action can provide teachers with a renewed sense of hope, while the process of connecting with colleagues in shared spaces allows teachers to feel safe and supported. These examples each speak to the critical role that relationships, whether between teachers and students or among groups of teachers, play in schooling.

Marginalized groups, inclusion, and equity

Cramer and Sommers also offer articles that address the relational and human aspects of urban school improvement. Cramer asks us to attend to the fact that systems such as Response to Intervention (RTI) that are touted as "solutions" to address student needs are often not evaluated in the circumstances or amongst the populations that comprise most urban districts. The author uses a review of the RTI literature in order to illustrate the dearth of research on the effectiveness of RTI for students in marginalized groups and to illuminate the dangers of this ongoing research gap. With this, she suggests that educational improvement in urban contexts can be improved only after more research is completed on how RTI does or does not work for students in these groups, and how it might be more attentive to cultural and linguistic differences amongst students.

In contrast to an argument grounded in existing literature, Sommers offers an empirical study that asks us to consider that students--in particular, refugee students--have agency to contribute to school improvement as the engage in strategies to cope with and reduce incidents of bullying. Moreover, Sommers contributes to this issue's theme of networks by broadening the definition advanced by Riley and Schiff to include the student as a critical player in networked solutions to school improvement. Her piece illustrates how critical it is to have students and teachers working together to effectively address school climate issues, which in turn play a pivotal role in academic performance.

Hill and Park contribute book reviews of, respectively, Jose Vilson's *This Is Not A Test: A New Narrative on Race, Class, and Education* and Maia Bloomfield Cucchiara's *Marketing Schools, Marketing Cities: Who Wins and Who Loses When Schools Become Urban Amenities*. Vilson's book, which calls for an inclusive space from which to consider the education system, offers a possible framework for dialogue in Philadelphia, where Cucchiara has illustrated that certain voices have traditionally been valued over others, possibly to the detriment of public education in the city of Philadelphia.

Institutional approaches to educational improvement

In contrast to the relational emphasis advanced by Cramer and Sommers, both Abdul-Jabbar and Kurshan and Stratos, Wolford, and Reitano examine approaches to improving urban education from a broader view, considering district-wide and institutionally-based intervention models. Abdul-Jabbar and Kurshan examine how the diversification model for providing schooling services has led to the development of education technology, specifically, to what they term "educational innovation ecosystems." Abdul-

Jabbar and Kurshan argue that a network of organizations--rather than a network of people, as suggested by Riley and Schiff--will be the mechanism for educational improvement.

Stratos et al., in their exploration of the Promise Academy model in Philadelphia, argue that Promise Academies floundered as a result of declining resources coupled with a declining commitment to its purpose on the part of teachers. This emphasizes that funding alone is not sufficient to sustain initiatives. Given what we've learned about the import of teacher professional networks, imagine what might have become of the initiative if district officials had made efforts to engage with and leverage existing teacher networks to establish buy-in and develop rapport with classroom practitioners.

Philadelphia-centric, but with broad relevance

Though this is a Philadelphia-centric issue, we believe that the topics discussed here, the lessons learned, and the arguments advanced, have broad relevance beyond this city. This issue suggests that networks of people or of organizations have tremendous power to influence the educational landscape in a city. What they do not address, however, is how networks of people and networks of organizations may interact to effect educational change--what might it look like when we take a truly systems-oriented approach to addressing the needs of urban school children? We encourage readers to consider how to integrate seemingly divergent approaches to urban educational improvement in their own practice as in research.

In preparation for our next issue, which will focus on teacher education in urban contexts, we invite you to consider the question of what is possible in teacher education. This Maxine Green-inspired issue will look at current and future practices and possibilities within teacher education and across contexts influenced by teacher education. How can the academy and K-12 education partner to support the optimal develop of students and teaching professionals? We believe that regardless of context, teacher education and teacher professional development should never be simply about content, but must also attend to improving teachers' sense of self-efficacy and commitment to the field. We believe in the power of a teaching force that is diverse in all respects, and encourage submissions that examine and critique efforts to achieve this goal and that offer insight into ways of providing meaningful, transformative, and professional opportunities for educators to continue honing their practice.

As always, we encourage multi-modal submissions. Perhaps your visceral reaction to the response piece--or indeed, to the issue as a whole--will be to add your own voice, or the voices of your colleagues, to the chorus advocating for enduring, or renewed, commitment to urban schools (send us a recording!). Perhaps your response will be to document, through practitioner inquiry, how you are making a difference as an educator in an urban school, even as you wrestle with daily struggles. Perhaps you will submit an empirical study of the lives of teachers, or write a letter to the Editors, or send us video or just a missive via email or Twitter.

We hope, only, that you will feel compelled to connect with us and with your fellow readers!

GINA CAPPELLETTI (Editor) is a doctoral student in Penn GSE's Educational Leadership program. Gina currently works with the Penn Center for Educational Leadership and serves as a new teacher mentor with Teach for America in Philadelphia. Her research examines principals' approaches to parent engagement within the context of urban revitalization and neighborhood change. Prior to her work at Penn, Gina taught 5th and 6th grade in Prince George's County, Maryland.

CAT McMANUS (Editor) is a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at Penn GSE. Cat has a B.A. in Anthropology from Dartmouth College and a Master's in Education, Culture and Society from Penn GSE. Before returning to academia, Cat was an admissions officer for 9 years at both Princeton and the University of Pennsylvania, where she worked on staff training and development and managed a partnership aimed at bringing more low-income students to the University. She's interested in issues of access to higher education, the interaction of non-profit organizations with educational institutions, organizational learning and organizational theory, and community colleges.

Source URL:https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-12-issue-1-spring-2015/editorial-teacher-networks-and-drive-equity