

# ***A PEDAGOGY OF INTENTIONALITY***

## ***Developing Scholars Dedicated to Social Justice***

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This article examines how 4 former students attending graduate school at an elite private university in the urban South were socialized toward social justice-oriented scholarship activism. Using Black Cultural Ethos as a conceptual framework, the authors interrogate how the students' shared experiences, relevant and related coursework, and a cultural ethos developed a cadre of scholars dedicated to social justice. The study involves the juxtaposition of themes identified during a tripartite literature review with the themes gleaned from a collection of ethnographic narratives to engage the following research questions: (1) What role can graduate programs play in developing scholars committed to social justice? (2) In what ways did the experiences of doctoral students exposed to the pedagogy of intentionality facilitate their development as social justice scholars? Findings suggest that through intentional cohort models and extracurricular community-based experiences, an educational studies department (ESD) in an elite private R1 university in the urban South created and maintained a social justice curriculum that reverberated throughout the department.

### ***INTRODUCTION***

Despite an increasing inclusion of social justice language in higher education settings, a focus on social justice in program development, curricula, educational philosophy, and service learning in institutions of higher education remains relatively unclear and sometimes unintentional (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Such unintentionality is problematic because marginalized students remain susceptible to overt and subtle hostilities in U.S. schools at all levels. We know that various forms of antagonism

exist in primary and secondary schools and on college campuses. We, also, know that the aggression is not neutral nor is it equal (Steele, 2011). The educational experiences of marginalized youth are influenced by the schools' climate, which means social justice work is just as important today as it was when segregation was legal (Kaiser, 2005).

In response to a lack of meaningful attention to social justice issues, this article explores how institutions of higher education might become more intentional in shaping teacher educators that have a social justice orientation.

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Specifically, we discuss how Black Cultural Ethos (BCE) coupled with a historical trajectory informed the development of a particular group of Black faculty dedicated to equal opportunities in education for urban youth. We also discuss how these frameworks can be used to imagine a future where teacher education can be shaped through a deliberate consideration of Black cultural ethos and social justice. This study is guided by two primary research questions: (1) What role can graduate programs play in developing scholars committed to social justice? (2) In what ways did the experiences of doctoral students exposed to the pedagogy of intentionality facilitate their development as social justice scholars?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study consists of scholarly personal narratives analyzed in accordance with information gleaned from a tripartite literature review that focused on intersections between three themes: BCE, Black educational history, and the graduate experiences of Black faculty. Emergent themes identified during the literature review have been triangulated with data culled from scholarly personal narratives (Heildebeger & Uecker, 2009; Janesick, 2015) produced by a group of Black scholars. This section will detail how we used the data generated by the study and BCE as a framework of analysis to generate study findings.

It should be noted that we interspersed ideas from our literature review throughout this article. As such, while there is not an identified “literature review” section, readers will find supporting details from our literature review linked to specific themes, findings, and positions taken in the course of this study throughout the article.

## **Data Collection**

Scholarly personal narratives have been described as a mixing of “self-reference and sound scholarship” (Nash & Bradley, 2011,

p. ix). The narratives generated by this study revolved around a retelling of each author’s experiences in an educational doctorate program in the urban South. Nash (2004) has asserted that good teaching is in part about storytelling. The sharing of the authors’ self-generated stories and the engagement of such stories allowed us to find sources of commonality and to elucidate the sources of knowledge embedded within them. In short, personal narratives enabled us to make meaning of (and across) our collective and individual experiences as guided by BCE’s emphasis on the collective and the individual.

Before endeavoring in the project, the research team decided to specifically write about our time at Elite University and our graduate level experiences. No other directions were offered to the authors in order to garner the most sincere, undirected stories possible. Upon completion, we met in a single location and exchanged personal narratives for coding. Each personal narrative was coded three times by each of the authors; this enabled us to achieve increased interrelater reliability. Commonalities across the documents related to the study were identified in the first round coding. During the second round of coding, these commonalities were grouped to identify emergent themes in the data. During the third round of coding, authors then discussed these themes in relationship to the relevant literature to identify and describe findings outlined in the findings section of this article relevant to this paper’s purpose.

## **Setting, Participants, and Positionality**

The participants involved in this study are former doctorate students trained in an elite private R1 university in the urban South. These four scholars presently work within the field of education, are founding members of a non-profit entity dedicated to educational advocacy, and continue to participate in community oriented social justice work collectively and separately. While discussing an upcoming conference via a virtual meeting space, the

four authors noted that their graduate student experiences had a profound effect on their perspectives that social justice could (and should) be a critical part of their ongoing academic work. We wondered just what role an R1 with a tenuous history but great potential for working through racial politics had in helping to shape our academic identities and commitments. Such was the impetus for this project.

All four study participants identify as Black and as having commitments that align with the history of social justice activism in Black educationist communities. Each works in the field of education as higher education faculty and as district-level teacher educators in P–12 settings. Author 4 is an assistant professor of interdisciplinary social sciences at a public state university in the South. Author 4's research engages Black student activism in the 1960s. Author 3 is an assistant professor of teacher education and program coordinator for education foundations and graduate programs at a southern HBCU. Her research interests include Black literacy and spirituality traditions as well as community engagement. Author 1 is a former area superintendent for one of the largest school districts in Georgia and currently works as an assistant professor of educational leadership and program coordinator of the EdD program at a research intensive southern university. Her research is committed to documenting the characteristics of Black educational leaders in the segregated South and how vestiges of their work are reflected in contemporary school leadership. Author 2 is an instructional coach in a large P–12 district in the urban South with ongoing research projects related to the history of Black Education and Black Teachers' training and pedagogical philosophies. We recognized that we shared a connection to social justice and a desire to exclusively work within spaces dedicated to social justice that sparked our interests in this study.

### ***(De)Limitations***

Graduate school is generally understood to be a stressful experience for most students

(Hughes, 2002; Steele, 2003). For Black students in particular, learning while under the pressures of marginalization and cultural difference, these stressors are often compounded (Debord & Milner, 1993). Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, and Bowles (2006) explain that there are nine themes associated with Black graduate students' experiences at predominantly White institutions: isolation and loneliness, racial hostility, persistence, psychological distress, surplus invisibility, stereotyping, invisibility, bias in grading, and indifference. Each of these themes suggest the hostility and oppression experienced by African American students in predominantly White settings. Despite their matriculation in an R1 institution, these nine themes are not readily observable in the cases examined for this study. That the authors had little to no experience of these themes during their matriculation demonstrates that what happened in our research setting may be different from what may be commonly experienced by other graduate students of color. While mentoring is one characteristic discussed by (Alston, Guy, & Campbell, 2017) that researchers tend to point to as influencing the identity development of Black doctoral students (Hall & Burns, 2009; Patton, 2009; Taylor & Antony, 2000), the data we collected do not support mentoring as the central factor in the identity development in our cases either. Instead, our data suggest that while the occurrences in our research setting may not be directly generalizable to other populations, it might also be a case that our findings can contribute significant understandings of how the experiences of Black graduate students might be shaped in different ways.

### ***Theoretical Framework: Black Cultural Ethos***

The concept of BCE is based on inherited West African values, ideas, and beliefs and is comprised of nine dimensions including: spirituality, harmony, movement, verve, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, morality, and social perspectives of time. For

the purposes of this article, we will focus primarily on communalism and expressive individualism (Boykin, 1986; Nobles, 1980). BCE necessitates that individuals operating within the Ethos share whatever individual successes they encounter with the community (Akbar, 2004; Kambo, 1998; Nobles, 1980). Those people who share space with the community but do not operate collectively as an integral part of the community are seen as dysfunctional through a BCE lens. The collective is privileged and must be considered as impacting, and being impacted by, the individuals that comprise it.

It is important to note that BCE's privileging of community includes recognition of the importance of expressive individualism. Expressive individualism has been described as a "proclivity for spontaneous, genuine personal expression" (Parsons, 2003). Such proclivity is acceptable as long as it is coupled with the BCE notion of communalism.

As a framework, BCE necessitates that scholars take a subjective stance in order to better understand how the individual experiences of community members shape—and are shaped by—the experiences of the collective. For the purposes of this study, BCE informs our methodological approach and, more specifically, directs our analysis of the data toward understanding cyclical impacts of the individual on the collective and vice versa.

## ***FINDINGS***

### ***Nurturing Curriculum, Community, and Space through BCE***

The department in which we were trained intentionally adopted two essential components of BCE—communalism and expressive individualism. These components were implemented and refined over the course of decades. Themes that emerged from the autoethnographies were importance of space, presence of a hidden curriculum, and students' previous commitments and identities.

Implementing and refining a department's focus that was intentional about creating a community of individuals trained to understand and express the role of social justice and to address historical and present-day educational inequities does not occur by happenstance. What and how graduate students are taught has the potential to shape their understanding about the role of social justice within education. Additionally, demographics of the graduate student cohort influence how social justice is understood during the formative years of doctoral training. The lack of diversity and inclusion rejects an important factor of BCE, which makes it nearly impossible to train scholars for social justice work. The University's Educational Studies Department's (ESD's) awareness of making sure the space was equipped with proper support to incubate social justice scholars illuminate that space is interconnected with the curriculum and community. These interconnections demonstrate that social justice is highly prioritized, which means no assumptions are made about graduate students entering the program. The expectations that when students graduate that they will have a social justice orientation based upon their exposure to a specific type of curriculum, community, and space. Our findings indicate that ESD's formal curriculum, and arguably more significantly, a hidden curriculum, were instrumental in shaping and affirming the social justice-oriented teaching and research trajectories of ESD's doctoral students. These findings provide a roadmap for higher education academic departments that are interested in creating a more equitable educational system but are unsure how to create an ethos to achieve that goal.

One of the major findings of this study was the degree to which BCE was both explicit and implicit within the curriculum of ESD. A key factor in the graduate student experience is coursework. As a part of the doctoral socialization process (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001), the formal curriculum or coursework functions alongside other institutional dynamics—mentoring, advising, peer-to-peer

collaboration—to help members “acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that make them more or less effective members of their society” (p. 3). As discussed throughout all four narratives, the formal ESD curriculum was intentionally interdisciplinary. For example, Author 3 (personal narrative, 2018) notes that “classes like *inferential statistics* and *comparative education* broadened her perspectives of the many policy decisions that affected U.S. public schooling that most laypeople were unfamiliar with.” Indeed, as part of the interdisciplinary curriculum, ESD doctoral students were required to take courses in inferential statistics, global and multicultural education, educational history, critical literacies, and educational psychology regardless of their research interests. As a result of this interdisciplinary curricular approach, ESD students are conversant across multiple fields of study. This approach demystified typically niche areas of educational research and provided students with the foundational knowledge necessary to think critically within the context of broader research questions related to social justice.

In addition, the formal curriculum was also a vehicle for ESD to express its position on social justice work as an academic endeavor through required and nonrequired coursework. According to Author 4 (personal narrative, 2018), “In ESD, the majority of us were trained to think about fairness and equity” and this occurred in courses “within and outside of one’s specialized interests.” As a pedagogical approach to understanding the materials, professors like Geoff Evans and Frank Xian, (both psychometricians) often encouraged students to relate assignments to their research interests. So, my operationalization and application of a *t* test, SPSS, independent and dependent variables were intertwined with learning how to quantify fairness and equity in education. Therefore, Introduction to Educational Research and Introduction to Statistics were just as foundational to my social justice development as a course like Education and Cultural Diversity because I learned that

issues of justice should not be compartmentalized. Author 4 stated, “coursework equipped me with the tools to measure and/or describe how what is being researched is relatable to the progress and/or regress of fairness and equity.” Grasping this concept was salient to the pedagogy of intentionality that was at the foreground of ESD’s formal curriculum. Faculty members constantly modeled for us that the professors who write about measurements should be just as concerned with fairness and equity as their colleagues who focus on diversity and race.

ESD faculty were cognizant and forthright regarding the ability of a formal curriculum to shape doctoral students’ view and understanding of fairness and equity. As a part of the formal training, graduate students took required courses that supported social justice frameworks as well as additional courses that further supported those frameworks. Author 3 (2018) discusses taking an additional course this way:

During my first semester at Elite U, I enrolled in Maina L. Wimms’ (then Franklin) “Literacy as a Civil Right” course. Happily, I found that this class not only explored literacy theory but also how literacy has been used both in the oppression and liberation of U.S. Black folks across time. The course enabled me to consider what I have known about Black history through a newer lens of literacy—something I had not done before despite my own research emphasis on symbolism and Black pedagogy.

Here, Author 3’s remembrance evidences how ESD students were guided through critical engagement of theory and critical analyses of power. In fact, students were exposed to courses that helped them think about fairness, equity, and oppression “across time” through a course specifically designed to evaluate ideas through a critical lens.

The data also show that while the formal curriculum institutionalized ESD’s social justice agenda, much of what the participants learned during their time in ESD was accomplished through the hidden curriculum of the

division. Hidden curriculum can be defined as unofficial expectations, unintended outcomes, and implicit messages; that is, what students learn through the implicit nature of the teaching and learning processes (Milner, 2006; Townsend, 1995). Throughout the narratives, each participant discusses the existence of a hidden curriculum and how it operated to convey the ESD ethos.

For example, Author 1 and Author 2 detail what they learned as a part of the hidden curriculum upon entering the program. Author 1 (2018) states that, from the very beginning, ESD students were encouraged by faculty and advanced graduate students to “support one another,” “lean on each other,” and to use “our unique skills and unique contributions” so that we would be stronger together. In the same vein, Author 2 (personal narrative, 2018) talks about how the “stratification and competition that occurred at other institutions was nonexistent as both an ideology and a practice” in ESD. As such, both participants’ analyses of what they learned early in their graduate experiences illumines that ESD valued collaboration and community over individualism. And, that this was communicated through an implicit curriculum—one ESD student had access to as members of the community.

This is not to say the hidden curriculum existed separately from the formal curriculum; instead, both curricula were intentionally interwoven so that the hidden curriculum supported the formal curriculum and vice versa. For example, courses were offered every other year, which meant that the youngest cohort took courses with the cohort above them. In doing so, ESD used a curricular infrastructure to reinforce the importance of community within and across cohorts.

Another important theme revealed through the analysis of our autoethnographies was the consideration and concern for space and place each of the scholars held as important to their time in ESD. In this conceptualization, space becomes more than simply a particular geographic area. Instead, it combines an understanding of the importance of the social and the

empirical characteristics of the area. But the construct of space, in the cases of this article, also includes the consideration of an environment as either supporting or destroying room required for growth. It marks the boundaries of an environment that allows for the development of particular pedagogies and identities. In their telling, each author looked forward to developing academically and professionally within an environment that would allow them to build and maintain community and community ties and to have their interests and researcher identities nurtured as they grew academically.

Consider what Author 1 (personal narrative, 2018) mentions about space in her autoethnography. In her description of the segregated schools of her precollege years, she writes,

As I reflect on my earliest education, I realize that my teachers and school leaders provided me space, time, and exposure to grow. My hopes and dreams were fomented in the soil of caring teachers, who daily challenged me to enlarge and expand my horizon.

As written, this suggests that Author 1 recognized that space could allow for the fullest expansion of her growing self.

Space whether forced or voluntarily entered offers congruency of experience that ESD worked to replicate. For example, while the Black schools attended by Author 1 were forced upon her by de jure segregation the other study participants voluntarily attended majority Black institutions (HBCUs) during their undergraduate years. Interestingly, this shared history of predominantly Black educational settings may have shaped their ideas of space in much the same ways as Author 1’s had been forged. While our conceptualization of space may not be necessarily unique to the Black experience, this shared understanding does describes the kind of educative setting each participant sought in ESD. Author 2 (personal narrative, 2018) describes her initial review of ESD’s website as looking like a “perfect place for me, my work, my growth, and my goals (emphasis added).” Notice that

her description of the space reveals her interest in the opportunities and room for continued growth just as Author 1's reflection did. This race-based and growth-focused place may not be entirely accidental. For it is possible that HBCUs and segregated schools hold in common an unwavering commitment to creating environments that support not only academic rigor but also social acceptance.

The autoethnographies taken as a whole not only reveal this desire for an environment that could be nurturing and allow for growth, they also indicate that there were some reservations about whether or not a prestigious PWI could be that kind of space. Author 3 (personal narrative, 2018) writes,

I had never before been a higher education student at a private, predominately White institution—especially one with the reputation of being the “Ivy of the South.” My earlier training had been at two public HBCUs and one other minority-serving institution. My intimidation had nothing to do with my academic preparation. I strongly believed that I had been trained exceptionally well at these institutions.... However, I was initially concerned that I would have difficulty fitting into a white space within which I could continue to have my budding African-centered scholarship nurtured.

Author 2 (personal narrative, 2018), also a graduate of an HBCU unknowingly shared this similar anxiety:

I remember meeting Author 4 during the luncheon and telling him I was nervous about whether I could compete at the “Harvard of the South” coming from a small HBCU in North Carolina. With as much politeness as Author 4 could muster, he shrugged off the notion and started pointing at all the people in the room who graduated from an HBCU. By doing this, Author 4 both challenged my problematic and ironic view of my beloved institution and education and helped me remember what it was like to be surrounded by people who spoke truth to power as a general principle. (Personal narrative, 2018)

These fears were not wholly unfounded as there have been accounts of Black doctoral students feeling discrimination and marginalization at higher rates than their White peers (Nettles, 1990).

Author 2's story elevates another important idea about space that runs throughout the autoethnographies. Students were as responsible as ESD faculty and staff in building the kind of nurturing, supportive space necessary to support growth. For example, Author 4 writes about two fellow students who created and implemented a course designed to take Elite U students into a nearby correctional facility to take classes with the people incarcerated there. This kind of “communal inquiry” and social justice activity was not the design of ESD faculty, but ESD graduate students. The story also marks a characteristic found among the Black doctoral students in our study—the objective of strengthening marginalized communities (Felder, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014).

Perhaps it was this concern for marginalized communities and for one another that made ESD feel welcoming to us. Author 1 (personal narrative, 2018) notes that the “ESD space felt different and at the same time familiar.” In this way, the data suggest that our shared desire to become one with the space contributed to our growth.

In efforts to become one with the space, ESD students routinely taught classes, supervised students, and helped plan community engagement activities. They also met regularly to support one another in writing and scholarship; for example, the computer lab within the division was a constant site of academic discussion and philosophical exercise. Indeed, we felt empowered to make the space what we most needed serves as a nod to the intentionality of a program specifically designed to raise a particular kind of scholar dedicated to social justice and urban education (ESD white paper, 1991).

As a whole, the autoethnographies reveal that the ESD community was built on a common mission: intentionality in the recruitment

of graduate students who shared common experiences; the commitment to research, work with, and improve urban education; and a deliberate indoctrination of a spirit of collegiality, comradery, and support within a research-intensive environment.

Intentionality was one of the key pillars in building the ESD community. From the perspective of Author 3, it was apparent that ESD was intentional in the recruitment of students based on the mission to serve urban populations and to create a cadre of scholars and leaders to serve 21st century schools (ESD white paper, 1991). This mission was supported by encouraging collegiality, support, and comradery. For example, Author 3 (2018) recalls her first sense of the faculty intentionality around how they built and recruited cohort members, when she recalls

I was pleased to encounter a racially and gender diverse faculty that expressed their own desires to create a cohort of graduate students capable of bringing a critical eye to the content of courses and who might contribute to a scholarly environment aligned with their mission.

In addition to the transparency of their mission, Author 3 (personal narrative, 2018) also writes about commonalities she observed during her initial campus interviews for admission to an ESD cohort. She espied other interviewees' ethnicities, their common backgrounds from predominantly Black or segregated institutions, and shared visions for education as liberation. The composition of the cohorts as well as conversations led by ESD faculty and upperclassmen revealed common connections that could have occurred only with the intentionality of the faculty.

According to Author 3 (personal narrative, 2018) "conversations over the two days between me and other interviewees revealed that many of us shared our desires to nurture our scholarly work while remaining committed to the communities from which we came." Author 2 (personal narrative, 2018) reinforces the common racial bond when she writes about

the relief she felt in the company of the other Black women being interviewed and that they seemed to be as nervous as she was about entering the space. These initial experiences of women, who would eventually become members of the same cohort, reinforced an already developed sense of ESD community, a community that was built on a mission and endeavored to recruit students with similar desires to work with urban schools.

Another component in the ESD community was the inculcation and indoctrination of the ESD ethos. Author 1 recalls that from the beginning of her tenure in ESD one of the professors greeted the students during an orientation speech with the phrase, "you are stronger together than you are apart." In Author 1's (personal narrative, 2018) words,

The professor admonished the students to conduct ourselves not as competitors but as colleagues whose job it was to support and encourage each other. She also insisted that ESD was not about competing against one another or to outshine one another, but to support one another. She stated that "this would be a lonely journey," but she encouraged us to lean on each other. She admonished that ultimately this would be our journey, one where our colleagues would travel alongside and support us.

From the beginning, ESD faculty emphasized the importance of support and collegiality as an ESD norm. Author 2 (personal narrative, 2018) also recalls how the idea of collegiality was reinforced when shortly after her arrival, a professor encouraged her cohort to name itself. Despite the controversy surrounding the No Child Left Behind policy, their cohort finally reached consensus and dubbed themselves No Candidate Left Behind. Author 3 (personal narrative, 2018) describes the cohort as a sisterhood that formed during that first meeting<sup>1</sup> when they settled on the name of *No Candidate Left Behind*. She records "that for me, the name spoke the intentional collaboration that we all recognized

would be necessary for our individual successes.”

In addition to articulating the ESD norm, some ESD professors deliberately built multi-level and intersecting structures that reinforced and inculcated those ESD norms through various research projects built on and around research related to marginalized students in urban settings. For example, even though students were designated by their cohort names such as No Candidate Left Behind, Uncontrolled Variables, and others, some groups like the Literacy, Language, and Culture cohort were not based on shared admission dates, but on specific research interests. These students with similar research interests worked together in cross-cohort groups, such as the Friday historical basement crew that gathered in one professor’s basement to work on the Tate Project, or the Literacy crew that met at a popular coffee shop on North Davidson Road to work on chapters in an upcoming work, or the midnight cohort who met in the lab regularly after hours. Students across cohorts worked with and learned from other cohort members. Author 1 (2018) adds that

These experiences cross-pollinated students and their work and ensured an institutionalization of the ESD culture. For someone who had never experienced a sorority, we became a fraternity of intellectual colleagues whose purpose was forged in the mines of ESD.

As a result of these relationships students enhanced skills and learned from each other within and sometimes across cohorts.

Work and play often spilled over into each other to become simultaneous experiences. One group traveled to Tybee Island to research historical artifacts related to the “History of African American Education.” Another group visited the Hampton Museum of Art to discuss the role of the Black Arts Movement on education. Another group visited a presentation on Hurricane Katrina at the Queen’s Memorial Center. Community was reinforced through these and other multiple, informal, inter, and intracohort gatherings. Thursday night *Grey’s*

*Anatomy* parties is another example (Author 1, 2018). As such, community was not structured solely through ESD’s formal curricula or admissions processes so much as it was through the cross-collaborative nature of students and faculty. Relationships were forged based on interests, needs, commitments. Author 3 (personal narrative, 2018) talks about her ESD experiences with ESD cohorts thus,

I realize that my strongest relationships with others at Elite U were with those who shared not only my incoming and/or graduation dates, but more importantly with those whose passions and commitments to culture and Black students mirrored my own. Studying Black students particularly or urban education more broadly was not enough.... Instead, I found myself most drawn to other students—regardless of cohort—with demonstrated commitments to the populations they sought to study.

Our findings suggest that there was some level of intentionality on the part of ESD to structure a doctoral experience that might develop a cadre of scholars dedicated to social justice. However, it is also important to note that students themselves played a significant role in structuring the space to be what they most needed. In alignment with BCE, individual students’ interests and agencies shaped the experiences of the collective and vice versa.

## DISCUSSION

### *The Process of Refusing to be Silent*

As we prepared for the 2018 American Educational Research Association annual meeting, we were reminded of instances where crucial voices refused to remain silent. For example, teachers in Oklahoma were striking because of low wages and students in Florida were protesting about gun control. While we would be remiss to act as if that moment in time was normal, it would be ahistorical to pretend as if we had not been here before (Anderson, 1988; Baker, 2006; Cecelski, 1994;

Danns, Purdy, & Span, 2015; Ravitch, 2000; Willis, 2014).

The current indictment of silence as violence harkens back to a well-known saying by Albert Einstein that asserts, “the world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watched without doing anything.” The articulation of the consequential characteristic of silence means that inaction is not neutral. In fact, contemporary and historical examples illuminate the danger of silence. Those negative consequences refer to the inactions of individuals and organizations; consequently, institutions that refuse to speak to and/or address an issue directly or indirectly contribute to the continuation of that issue. Silence by elite institutions could be seen as violence because of the political, educational, and social capital they possess. The constant choice made by elite institutions to disassociate from unjust external matters create unique challenges for social justice educators and the graduate students they are tasked with training. Indeed, social justice educators must find unique ways of promoting a social justice agenda that moves beyond institutions’ default stances to be silent (though they may more politically employ the term “neutral”).

The adage regarding the cyclic nature of life is reflective in the recurring discourse around the essential function of elite institutions as they relate to public education. The answers to the dreams, the possibilities, and the necessity of public education are not harmonious. In fact, they are highly contested and shaped by the historical and contemporary sociopolitical climate. This means academic institutions need to be scrutinized by scholars when discussing issues related to education.

Historical and contemporary scholarship has laudably described how learning institutions at various levels develop an ethos. The developed ethos is not static, but responsive to sociopolitical factors. For example, Anderson (1988) notes how Blacks’ desire for formal schooling shaped public education in the South in the early 20th century while Taylor (2016) articulates how tragedies like Mike Brown and

triumphs like the election of Barack Obama influence the ideals of millennials who occupy learning spaces. Undoubtedly, academic spaces are shaped by the world surrounding them and higher education spaces have not been exempted.

Dr. Sarah Virginia Tate, an endowed professor who has worked at elite institutions her entire career, once stated “the nature of an elite institution typically does not include a social justice agenda.” In response to her comment, Author 4 (personal narrative, 2018) writes that “At the time, I thought this statement was contradictory because we were at a call to action meeting in a classroom located on the campus of an elite university.” The purpose of the meeting was to brainstorm about how we might be more intentional about linking what we were reading and producing scholastically to the lived experiences of practitioners and students, particularly where we resided in the southeastern part of the United States (Croft, Pogue, & Siddle Walker, 2018). The urgency to link theory with the praxis originated from a collective belief amongst faculty members and graduate students that the disconnect between public secondary schools and institutions of higher learning, especially private, contributed to the educational issues urban schools face. Furthermore, we knew collectively that Elite U had resources that could be used to address issues principals, teachers, and students were experiencing. So, while we—working as a component of the institution—were devising a plan on how to simultaneously get resources from our private university into neighboring schools and give practitioners access to the institution, the larger institution was disconcertingly silent regarding matters related to public schools.

ESD’s collective intent on creating a curriculum that elevated justice and equity contributed greatly to the establishment and the maintenance of our scholarly identities. In the field of education there are various stakeholders and constant conversations about the field. Our connection was not based solely on people, organizations, and places but to school

students and to the collective. There was and continues to be a loyalty to the intellectual inquiry of complex issues. Intentional establishment of a community in which we collectively learned how not to be drawn into the trappings of the politicization of education has increased our resolve to social justice because the conversation always serves as a reminder that even the decisions that determine the allocation of resources should be scrutinized. Author 4 (personal narrative, 2018) writes,

One of the questions I constantly ask my students is why rich/wealthy people have access to the best education. Never has a student said rich/wealthy people do not have access to better education. Most students respond by saying children benefit from their parents' hard work, that is the way it has always been, and/or people with more economic means deserve more. Rarely do I get a response that speaks to the inherent bias in educational funding dating back centuries.

If I am honest with myself, my response to this question as an undergraduate would have been like most of my students. For much of my academic career, I accepted the allocation of access but had a problem with the ways in which black people were denied access. Meaning, people who had access for whatever reason did not receive a lot of my attention. I focused primarily on those who did not have access for racial, class, and other reasons. However, the failure to critique the allocation of access indirectly allows the myth of meritocracy to go unchecked and that is very dangerous because people begin to believe that our results correlate with our efforts.

There are several inaccurate conclusions around meritocracy pertaining to education that have survived throughout history and being around social justice scholars has taught Author 4 how to empirically attack those inaccuracies. Seminal works by Maisha Winn (2018), Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996), and many others elevate variables that disrupt the accepted ideas that educational resources are

disproportionately allocated to rich/wealthy people primarily due to merit. Their works articulate historical and contemporary inherit unfairness, which provide greater rewards for the rich/wealthy and White than others. This deeper articulation of unfairness and what is just and equitable occurs in communal spaces, which is extremely important for up and coming social justice scholars to have while doing similar work.

## CONCLUSION

The words of a former advisor remain relevant nearly a decade later because social justice agendas in higher education remain personnel driven rather than institutionally created. Anecdotal experiences along with empirical data illuminate various ways institutions of higher learning deprioritize social justice by leaving the daunting task of implementation up to a selected group of faculty and staff members, departments, and/or institutions. Since completing our doctorates in 2013 and 2014, we have increasingly found ourselves searching for social justice communities within academic spaces. These communities have not been easy to find because faculty, staff, and departments have few incentives to create and maintain a social justice agenda. In fact, the common theme that we have experienced as nontenure track, tenure track, district level employees at various institutions, is that institutions of higher learning do not see themselves as culprits in creating systemic inequities; so, promoting a social justice agenda within an institution that sees itself faultless is a constant challenge that we have been trained to address.

One could surmise that higher education has served a pivotal role in all of this because of the scope of its training. Teachers, lawyers, doctors, politicians, artists, athletes, and so many others are influenced by their time spent in higher education spaces so understanding the ethos of those spaces is critical to understand-

ing how those spaces address the function of education. Furthermore, as discussions around the purpose of education continue in the 21st century, we need to know if and how questions around fairness and justice correlate to a learning institution's characteristics (Barry, 2005; Brennan & Naidoo, 2008; McArthur, 2016). Accordingly, we need to pay closer attention to institutions and/or departments within those institutions that prioritize fairness and justice in order to see how they reflect the tenets and intentions of social justice work.

Because we understand how our graduate school experiences have shaped the ways through which we furiously work for social justice, we believe it imperative that we share these experiences with others interested in shaping further scholars similarly. For us, neither education nor the research of it is neutral. It is political. But educational research should not be mired in politics. Instead, it should be permeated by those with a deliberate and intentional commitment to social justice.

## NOTE

1. Ironically, it was not until this writing that I have chosen to use the term sisterhood in describing the family we formed in ESD. I have long considered several members of NCLB as my sisters, but it is in this moment that I realize that we had no male member in our cohort. While cross-cohort relationships added men like Author 4 and Chris Green into my own circle of colleagues, I have not considered gender as a possible impetus to the kinds of relationships I experienced at ESD.

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