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Learning from Our History: The Role of the New York Collective of Radical Educators in Movements for Educational Justice

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NEW YORK COLLECTIVE OF RADICAL EDUCATORS (NYCORE) LOGO

Overview and Objectives

While the literature on educator activism has grown in the last ten years, there is still little documentation of the history of educator activist collectives and their impact.¹ One well-known educator activist group—which originated in New York City—is the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE). Unlike today, there were few identifiable educator activist groups in New York City in 2001 when NYCoRE was founded. While the teachers' union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), continued to organize and fight for teacher benefits, it was not part of larger struggles for social justice (Asselin, 2019; Back, 2001; Podair, 2002; Stark, 2019). According to NYCoRE's mission statement,

New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE) is a group of current and former public-school educators and their allies committed to fighting for social justice in our school system and society at large, by organizing and mobilizing teachers, developing curriculum, and working with community, parent, and student organizations. We are educators who believe that education is an integral part of social change and that we must work both inside and outside the classroom because the struggle for justice does not end when the school bell rings. (New York Collective of Radical Educators, 2011)

The purpose of this article is to analyze the historical and potential future impact of NYCoRE on educational justice movements in New York City. We do this to both reflect internally and share what we have learned with a broader community of radical educators. Given that NYCoRE recently celebrated its twenty-year anniversary, this article also looks toward the future by asking the question: What can we learn from NYCoRE's history in order to theorize the role of NYCoRE, and groups like NYCoRE, in educational justice movement work? In doing so, we seek to further develop ideas about the role of educators in social justice movements and, more specifically, the role of educator activist groups that organize outside of union spaces. These theoretical understandings inform the work we engage in collectively as NYCoRE.

Whose Voices Are Included in This Article?

One of the authors (Jenna) conducted oral history interviews with the six founding core members of NYCoRE (Ariana Mangual Figueroa, Keith Catone, Jessica Klonsky, Lisa Adler, Chris Maestro, and Daniel "Herm" Jerome) and three early core members (Edwin Mayorga, Bree Picower, and Sally Lee) during the fall of 2020. While NYCoRE has a larger membership of people who participate in and help facilitate events, "core" is the main decision-making body for NYCoRE and meets monthly to discuss and plan the work of NYCoRE. Core is and has always intentionally been led by a majority of people of color and women/gender expansive individuals. Each interview with the previous core members included questions about the individual's entry into education, memories about what NYCoRE did/does, the

significance of NYCoRE's work, and the impact being involved in NYCoRE had on the individual. These interviews were then synthesized by Jenna into a paper that told a preliminary story about how NYCoRE started. In January 2021, the current NYCoRE core hosted a Zoom meeting with everyone who had been interviewed to get feedback on the initial paper.

While Jenna did much of the writing and synthesizing work in this article, the ideas presented here were generated through reading, reflection, and conversations amongst those interviewed as well as the six core members of NYCoRE in 2023, who are referred to throughout the article using "we." The use of "NYCoRE" and "they" in this article refers to the founding and early core members of NYCoRE, who are no longer actively part of core. In addition, former core members and others involved in similar teacher activist groups wrote many of the works we cite. Before submitting this article for publishing, we sent it back to those interviewed for a final round of feedback and to ask for permission to include their names.

As the authors of this article, we have been involved in NYCoRE in a variety of ways and are all currently on NYCoRE core. Natalia, a mother of two and a Chilena-Riqueña native New Yorker, began teaching and joined NYCoRE in 2006. In 2012 Natalia transitioned out of the classroom to pursue a PhD in Urban Education and is currently a Clinical Assistant Professor at New York University in the Department of Teaching and Learning. Rosie is a White, queer, trans masculine teacher who joined NYCoRE their first-year teaching in 2006. They have been a core member of NYCoRE since 2009. They teach English and social studies to newcomer high school students in Brooklyn. Jenna is a White, queer educator who joined NYCoRE when she moved to New York City in 2011, where she taught in Brooklyn for seven years before starting a PhD in Urban Education at the CUNY Graduate Center. This paper is connected to her dissertation research on educator activist groups like NYCoRE. Ashia was born and raised in Harlem, NY. Her mother is an Afro-Caribbean immigrant from St. Kitts, and her father was a first-generation Italian American veteran. She joined NYCoRE in 2012 when she first started teaching and currently works with college students who have experience in foster care. Liz, a mixed-race person of Puerto Rican and Peruvian descent, came to NYCoRE through the Educators of Color affinity group around 2014 in search of a sense of community with like-minded people. She is a public-school visual art educator with 21 years of experience. Pam, an educator with roots in the Bronx and the Dominican Republic, joined NYCoRE in 2016 when she began attending monthly meetings and participating in Inquiry to Action Groups, which are described in more detail below. After teaching in nonprofit and K-12 settings for nearly ten years, Pam has left the classroom to study General Psychology at the New School for Social Research.

NYCoRE's History

NYCoRE's Founding

2001 was quite a year, for U.S. schools and the nation. George W. Bush was inaugurated as president and soon

after, on September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York City as well as the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. Quickly after the attacks, anti-war rallies began in places like D.C. and New York City (Anti-war rallies, 2001). Lawmakers implemented a multitude of national policies, including the War in Iraq, the PATRIOT Act, and No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB, a sweeping education reform policy, was signed into law by President Bush on January 8, 2002. In addition to increasing the focus on standardized testing (Klein, 2015), NCLB included a lesser-known provision that required “public secondary schools to provide military recruiters not only with access to facilities, but also with contact information for every student — or face a cutoff of all federal aid.” (Goodman, 2002), As a result, the military started recruiting Black and Brown youth in public schools. The New York Collective of Radical Educators was founded in this context.

The founding six members of NYCoRE connected over the course of the 2001-2002 school year, with the group officially meeting in 2002. After 9/11, one of the founding members, Jessica Klonsky, was involved in ad hoc protests against the U.S. government military response to 9/11 and went to anti-war meetings around the city. Through this, Jessica met Lisa Adler, who she began meeting with to try to figure out where other radical teachers were organizing. Jessica and Lisa looked at model groups like the Coalition for Education Justice in Los Angeles and realized that there were no grassroots, teacher-based groups in New York City, so they decided to start one. As Lisa remembers it, “we started as teachers, with the vision of becoming this bigger thing [with parents and students], but also understood our own limitations in terms of time, our responsibility to teach a progressive curriculum” (L. Adler, personal communication, November 24, 2020). Jessica was teaching at EBC High School in Bushwick at the time and Lisa was at IS 145 in the Bronx (but soon moved to EBC with Jessica), while the other founders were all at Banana Kelly High School in the Bronx. Jessica knew Herm Jerome through previous organizing experiences and called him to ask if he wanted to start a group, saying that teachers needed to have a response to what was happening post-9/11, particularly in terms of the War in Iraq and the military recruitment happening in schools. Herm knew Keith Catone, Chris Maestro, and Ariana Mangual Figueroa through Banana Kelly and brought them into the conversations.

Determining NYCoRE’s Focus and Identity

In the early 2000s, as NYCoRE grew, the group had questions about NYCoRE’s focus and how they were going to organize. While NYCoRE had initially formed around military recruitment of Black and Brown youth in schools and anti-war sentiments amongst teachers, the organization soon expanded beyond this issue. Keith recalled that, “we were never intent about being a single-issue kind of organization. To me, it was always about connecting teachers to broader social movement issues, doing education justice organizing more broadly” (K. Catone, personal communication, November 11, 2020). In many ways, the issues NYCoRE chose and chooses to focus on were and still are based on what teachers and the communities they work with are confronting. Over time, these issues have included counter-military recruitment, anti-high stakes testing,

decriminalization of youth, supporting queer and undocumented youth in schools, examining the intersections of racism and neoliberalism, fighting ableism in education, and more. For example, early in NYCoRE’s history, the group created a curriculum to accompany the *Military Myths* documentary made by Paper Tiger television. Soon after, NYCoRE supported a campaign against military recruitment of youth led by the YA-YA Network. Eventually, counter-military recruitment became a working group in NYCoRE (more on working groups below). For more information on this and other NYCoRE projects and working groups, you can check out a [timeline of our history](#) Jenna recently added to our website.

In early meetings, questions about the group’s identity developed. When the group ultimately settled on the New York Collective of Radical Educators as its name, the choice of radical was purposeful and centered the founders’ belief that radical, systemic change was needed inside and outside of schools. In addition to the name, the collective also developed points of unity to express their values. Ariana shared that,

We read together, we talked, we were learning together and growing. I remember that being really powerful in terms of really looking to the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords Party as, you know, Black and Brown coalitions that were radical, for justice, and that articulated a set of principles in this point fashion. That was really meaningful to us. And so we read those and we worked on our points of unity. (A. Mangual Figueroa, personal communication, November 3, 2020).

The points of unity were finalized in 2003 and NYCoRE started having one to two retreats every year, where the mission statement and points of unity were used to help guide the direction of the group. In reflection, Edwin said that “those points of unity helped to galvanize, or to solidify our relationship and really create friendships and family” (E. Mayorga, personal communication, November 16, 2020).

The points of unity developed by NYCoRE were revised in 2014 and again in 2022 based on learning sessions and feedback from the broader community after we celebrated NYCoRE’s twenty-year anniversary. While the topics are mostly the same as those found in our original points of unity, we have shifted the language and format. In particular, our new points of unity, which can be found on [our website](#), are each written with what we value, what we see as the problem, and our vision for the future of liberatory education related to that topic. The original points of unity from 2003 were as follows:

1. Racism and economic inequality in the school system reflect and perpetuate the systematic and historical oppression of people of color and working-class communities. As educators in the New York City public school system, we have a responsibility to address and challenge these forms of oppression.
2. In order to combat economic, social, and political systems that actively silence women and people of

color, we are committed to maintaining majority women and people of color representation in our group.

3. We oppose the current policy of high stakes standardized testing because it reflects the standards and norms of dominant groups in society, it is an inaccurate and incomplete assessment of learning, and it stifles pedagogical innovation and active learning.
4. Punitive disciplinary measures such as “Zero Tolerance” further criminalize youth and are not an answer to crime and other social problems. We believe economic and social priorities should be toward education of young people and not incarceration.
5. We oppose the increased efforts of military recruitment in New York City public schools. These efforts unfairly target the recruitment of low-income communities and make false promises about educational and career opportunities. We believe that these efforts are an extension of an imperialistic strategy to maintain a powerful military force in order to protect and promote US world dominance.
6. New school funding policies must be adopted in order to ensure equitable resources for all. Current policies based upon property taxes discriminate against low-income communities and urban areas, which disproportionately affect people of color.
7. Schools must be safe spaces for females and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) individuals. Verbal and physical abuse targeting these groups is extremely prevalent in most schools, cannot be tolerated, and must be challenged by all faculty, staff, and administrators.
8. Schools should be places of questioning and critical thinking that encourage students to see themselves as active agents of change. The present educational system is derived from an assembly line model that stifles critical thinking by focusing on the regurgitation of facts and information.
9. Schools should provide a neighborhood space through which community voices are heard. Teachers are an integral part of this space and must be held accountable to the community by being involved in addressing community needs. (*Points of Unity from 2013*)

The decision to focus on multiple issues brought up (and still brings up) questions of NYCoRE’s purpose and focus. Over the years, NYCoRE has provided a space for educators to act and reflect on different issues they care about in a variety of ways, including curriculum and resource development, political education, political statements and actions, campaigns, building community with other

organizing groups, and providing spaces for members to facilitate and lean into their own interests.

As a city-wide organization composed primarily of educators, what it means to organize educators was a question that NYCoRE grappled with and continues to confront because there are many issues that educators are concerned with, so focusing on one campaign is challenging. In the beginning, NYCoRE focused on military recruitment, standardized testing, and policing/discipline in schools by expanding to a working group structure. Working groups have varied over the years based on teacher interests but generally engage in both critical professional development and (in many but not all working groups) solidarity work with other organizing groups. Outside of working groups, NYCoRE members have contributed to organizations and campaigns in NYC educational justice movements such as Teachers Unite, Occupy the DOE (which occurred in collaboration with Occupy Wall Street), and the NYC Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools.

In addition, while NYCoRE did not organize within the teacher’s union directly, the group did amplify calls for New York City teachers and the teacher union to be more aligned to racial justice movements. In recent years, there has been a rise in progressive caucuses in teacher unions across the country including in places like New York City, Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia. These progressive caucuses were preceded by teachers being members of activist groups like NYCoRE (Charney et al., 2021; Stark, 2019). Several core members of NYCoRE were integral to the founding of the Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE) in 2012, which now operates as the social justice caucus within the United Federation of Teachers (Asselin, 2019). MORE came together through a series of coalition meetings in 2011. At the time, radical and progressive educator groups in New York City included the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM), NYCoRE, and the Teachers for a Just Contract (TCJ) and Independent Community of Educators (ICE) opposition caucuses within the UFT. Sally Lee and Natalie Havlin from Teachers Unite, as well as NYCoRE members such as Rosie Frascella and Sam Coleman, helped to host meetings with representatives from each of these groups and the coalition called themselves Voltron. Eventually, in 2012, members from Voltron decided to come together officially to form MORE.

NYCoRE Membership and Structure

As the core grew, the question of who was on core and what membership meant emerged. In the early years, members who joined and stayed became a part of core, which typically consisted of 5-15 people, but after the external listserv was created and the group expanded, NYCoRE was structured with a core group that made (and makes) most of the planning decisions, working groups focused on various issues of interest to the broader NYCoRE membership, and a base comprised of the email listserv that currently has about 1,500 people. NYCoRE does not work directly with particular schools but rather engages educators from across New York City. NYCoRE members are educators, broadly defined, including pk-12 teachers and other school workers from the New York City Department of Education,

college professors and staff, social workers, staff in education non-profits, and more.

One way NYCoRE has engaged members beyond the core was (and still is) through monthly membership meetings, which are typically attended by between fifteen and fifty people and are open to anyone who wants to attend. One hour of the two-hour meetings is dedicated to political education and discussion. In the past, during the second hour, educators would choose a working group they wanted to organize with or continue the political education conversations. Presently, the second hour is focused on small group activities and conversation. In addition to the membership meeting structure, NYCoRE has offered reading groups, events featuring education scholars/organizers/activists, an annual (and later, biannual) conference, and annual Inquiry to Action Groups (ItAGs). Initially called study groups, the ItAGs started in NYCoRE in early 2004 (Picower, 2015) and are also modeled after similar work being done in activist spaces like Teachers 4 Social Justice in San Francisco. ItAGs last between six and eight weeks, meeting once a week for two hours. Each ItAG focuses on a particular topic of study and culminates in some type of action. Some examples of past ItAG topics from 2007 to 2012 include: media justice, radical math, restorative justice, social justice curriculum, creating safer spaces for queer and undocumented youth, interrupting Islamophobia, nonviolence education, and developing stronger parent-teacher relationships (New York Collective of Radical Educators, 2017). ItAG actions vary and have included shifts in curriculum and pedagogy in the participants' classrooms, the creation of new working groups, the production of resources for teachers such as websites or curriculum guides, public performances, and more.

NYCoRE was and is not separate from the society in which the collective operates and can replicate oppressions within the collective. This has been a challenge the collective must continue to confront, particularly in terms of creating supportive and welcoming spaces for educators of color. From the beginning, the core has been majority people of color. In Sally's initial email exchange with Lisa about joining NYCoRE, she remembers Lisa explicitly stating that the group was recruiting new members who were teachers of color and did not want a flood of White teachers joining the collective. As the group grew beyond the core, however, maintaining a majority of people of color in open meeting spaces became a challenge. Edwin remembers the initial core in the first few years being diverse both in terms of race and gender but reflected on the challenges of remaining committed to NYCoRE's (then second) point of unity, saying,

One is the challenge of who's in the teaching force in New York City and beyond in this country and how not diverse it is and the gender politics that I think are associated with that. The other part of it is the practices in which, in what ways were we reproducing Eurocentric, White-centric practices in terms of progressive or radical educational stances. We were all influenced by Marx and critical race theory but even with that, I look back and realize, in what ways, in our open meetings, who are we appealing to? Who are we recruiting? What were the dynamics in those spaces? If it wasn't specifically about an organizing topic, in what ways were people of color,

women, LGBT queer folk, feeling marginalized? (E. Mayorga, personal communication, November 16, 2020).

As NYCoRE grew past the first several years of the organization, challenges regarding the racial makeup and dynamics of the group, organizing focus and style, and capacity would continue to arise. While we make sure to maintain a core leadership of majority people of color, monthly membership meetings, which were/are open to anyone who wishes to come, often were (and are) majority White, reflecting the makeup of the teaching force, which is still about 80% White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Some individuals would come once or twice and then not return; we struggled (and still struggle) with ways to address microaggressions in those spaces beyond doing NYCoRE 101s with new members to make sure everyone was clear on NYCoRE's points of unity and entered meetings conscious of their positionality.

In response to these dynamics, individuals in NYCoRE created racial affinity groups in 2011: Educators of Color (EoC) and the Anti-Racist White Educators Group (AWE-G). The Educators of Color (EoC) affinity space first came out of community potlucks initiated by core members of color who wanted to build intentional community with other educators of color. AWE-G emerged from the "My Classroom is Anti-Racist" Inquiry to Action Group in conjunction with EoC (Strong et. al., 2017). Despite all of the ways we have strategized to address the reality that our events were (and are) mostly attended by White folks, we continue to be in reflection around the ways we could make our space more welcoming and supportive for educators of color.

NYCoRE's Role

NYCoRE's ultimate goal has shifted over time but has always included fighting for education for liberation. We wrote our current goal in 2020, which is "to have liberatory educational practices/pedagogy, classrooms, and public schools for our students, families, teachers, and communities as a microcosm and model for society at large and the society we'd like to create." Ultimately, the role of and need for NYCoRE (and arguably, teacher activist groups more broadly) has been and could be creating a political home for radical educators, providing critical professional development, and moving educators to action through shifts in classroom practices and/or participation in larger movements for educational justice. Each of the following sections consists of what we see as a conversation between the literature of radical pedagogy (much of which has been written by people involved with NYCoRE or similar collectives), NYCoRE's work now, and our theorizing about NYCoRE's future.

A Political Home

The Literature

Radical educators often feel isolated in schools due to their political beliefs and identities, particularly given claims from public officials and school leaders that teaching should not be political (Walker, 2018). While many activists and scholars have argued that all teaching is political and teachers have the political agency to participate in social transformation (Catone, 2017; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Kohli et. al, 2019; Picower, 2015; Love, 2019), radical educators have been and still are told to remain “neutral” in schools (Walker, 2018) and educators who are seen as too political, particularly educators of color, are often pushed out (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018; Castaneda et. al., 2006; Retta, 2021).

Our Present

NYCoRE has created and continues to create a political home for radical educators, a topic that came up in multiple interviews with founding members, one of whom said that NYCoRE “created an amazing space for so many other like-minded educators. Oftentimes, you feel like you’re isolated [in your school]” (C. Maestro, personal communication, December 2, 2020). While the second Iraq War and military recruitment were catalysts, it was the lack of a radical organizing space for educators that ultimately pushed many of the founders to come together and start NYCoRE.

Twenty years later, this is still the case. At an NYCoRE event in the spring of 2022, we asked those attending to share what they loved about NYCoRE; a common thread was how NYCoRE brings people together to learn, create change, and be in community. We attempt to build community at our events by prioritizing food (when in person), music, play through icebreakers and activities that incorporate movement, and conversation. During the pandemic, we still hosted virtual events that prioritized political study and/or wellness through activities like virtual dance parties. We returned to in person open member meetings and social events in the fall of 2022 after much reflection on how to best do so during an ongoing pandemic. The return to being in person, in community with others, has been joyful.

Theorizing Our Future

While we have struggled to define what it means to be a member of NYCoRE, a common reflection from those participating in NYCoRE is the feeling of community. Many radical educators feel politically isolated in their schools. Change cannot happen individually and, as Mariame Kaba (2021) says, hope is a discipline, something that must be cultivated to continue fighting for justice. Keith Catone (2017) also found that teacher activists are sustained by critical hope, which, alongside having a clear purpose, allows them to see themselves (and the students and caregivers they work with) as agents of change. We maintain our hope that change is possible and combat feelings of isolation that still exist for radical teachers in New York City schools by being in community with like-minded individuals. Our hope is that NYCoRE is a space to process, reflect on, and strategize ways to organize inside and out of schools through story-sharing, political education, and connecting educators

to resources and actions (see more below). For many of us, NYCoRE’s community helps us stay in the teaching profession and continue to push for justice in our school systems.

As we return to in-person events and meetings after having gone remote for over two years during the pandemic, we are thinking about what it means to build community in sustainable ways that support educators and school staff, especially educators of color, to stay in the teaching profession, make their classroom spaces more equitable, and organize for school and system-level change. We want to build spaces that allow people to connect and move at the speed of trust (Brown, 2017). We are learning from transformative justice movements about structures and protocols to address harm when it happens, which sometimes seems inevitable in a collective space where educators come together across many different identities. In particular, in core, we are learning to center relationships and restorative practices when we work through conflict as a collective. After learning from several internal conflicts, everyone on core is now asked to commit to restoring with one another if/when harm happens. We use a yellow wing protocol in our internal core meetings, in which a card with a yellow wing can be placed on the table or given to a person as a way to signify a conflict that needs to be addressed. When harm happens in larger, open member meetings, someone on core follows up with those involved to determine next steps. However, we recognize that the current protocols we use depend on relationships; we are still thinking about ways to address harm and microaggressions, beyond having community norms, in open member meetings where we do not know everyone in attendance.

Ultimately, we believe and hope that NYCoRE’s community building practices can serve as a counter to what’s happening in schools. We recognize that the urgency and time constraints in school buildings often make it easier for all people in schools (teachers, school staff, administrators, students, etc.) to lose sight of the power of and need for community. Radical educators need community so that they don’t feel like the only ones doing “the work” in their school buildings. Building community and relationships with other radical educators is also a prerequisite for establishing vulnerability and trust, factors which are necessary for educators to engage in critical, transformative professional development that can shift what’s happening in their classrooms and schools.

Critical Professional Development

The Literature

One of the roles of teacher activist groups has been to counter the traditional narratives about teaching and pedagogy perpetuated in teacher education programs and schools. These traditional narratives include Banking education (Freire, 1970), which treats students as empty receptacles to be filled by (teacher) knowledge; ideas of classroom management in which the ultimate objective is to control children through punitive disciplinary practices (Hirschfield, 2008; Gillen, 2014; Love, 2019; Terenzi,

2017); and teaching to the test, in which curriculum is standardized and not culturally responsive or sustaining (Alim & Paris, 2017; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Oakes et. al., 1997; Schneider, 2018). Many social justice educators do not thrive in traditional or anti-dialogical professional development spaces because these spaces often utilize a banking method (Freire, 1970), which, as is done with the banking method used in classrooms, treats teachers as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge rather than co-contributors who can participate in a dialogue about pedagogy and education.

In contrast, in critical professional development “the role of the teacher is active, empathetic, emotional, intellectual, and professional” (Picower, 2015, p. 3). In Kohli et al. (2015), the authors point to the ways their respective teacher activist groups practice Freire’s (1970) notion of dialogical action by providing transformative professional development for educators. In many ways, critical professional development is grounded in political education and shares common traits. Critical professional development nourishes the critical bifocality (Weis & Fine, 2012) of teachers, which helps them see themselves as part of larger systems and question their positionality in schooling and educational policy. This kind of thinking positions teachers to not only change their pedagogy but also participate in activism outside of their classrooms, working toward systemic change.

Our Present

NYCoRE is a teacher activist group that provides dialogical practices to reposition teachers and educators as “transformative intellectuals, who have a political analysis and take action for social justice” (Kohli et. Al, 2015, p.22). As discussed above, NYCoRE provides critical professional development primarily through member meetings and Inquiry to Action Groups. As Picower (2015) states in her study, educators see NYCoRE, and specifically co-participants in ItAGs, as part of a professional network with like-minded people. All these political education events are meant to fill gaps that exist in traditional teacher education and professional development and support educator activism. For example, in 2023 our ItAGs covered topics such as school abolition, disability justice, queer identities in schools, implementing culturally responsive frameworks in secondary classrooms, and the transformative power of art.

As a core, we are continually thinking of how to engage educators in critical praxis, moving from political education to action, both in individual classrooms and at a school or city-wide level. All the critical professional development we provide focuses on systemic oppression and the importance of both individual and collective action. During the COVID-19 pandemic, NYCoRE continued meetings online that aimed to create a political home for educators (particularly amidst the stresses of multiple pandemics, remote teaching, and the return to in-person teaching) and provide critical professional development through book clubs, ItAGs, and reflections on NYCoRE’s points of unity as we celebrated our twenty-year anniversary. In the fall of 2022, as we shifted back to in-person meetings, we re-evaluated (and are still re-evaluating) what’s needed right now. As a core, we meet monthly and have summer retreats. Our goal is to be as

responsive as possible to the political and socio-emotional needs of educators, which is also why we prioritize a makeup in core not only of majority people of color but also individuals who are classroom teachers.

What we’re noticing now is that educators are burnt out and need community with like-minded educators. What we decide to center in our meetings is based on what’s needed in the moment and also draws on our previous experiences. We’re currently looking to past events, such as a summer wellness retreat for educators of color NYCoRE hosted in 2012, when thinking about how to create healing community spaces for educators that are grounded in the current sociopolitical context. In the spring of 2023, for example, we held a “love on teachers and school workers day.” The event included food and conversation, arts and crafts, professional massages, and a guided meditation as a closing. We also created space during that meeting for participants to explicitly process the multiple stressors and challenges educators were facing during the school year; people had a lot to say. There was a sentiment of heaviness in the room, but after our closing meditation, everyone expressed appreciation for the space, with a few saying they didn’t realize how much they needed it. While we still believe political education is a necessary and important part of our work, our goal in this moment was to honor the revolutionary work that NYCoRE teachers and school workers do every day for students and families in schools.

Theorizing Our Future

We provide critical professional development because we hope that educators will take what they learn back to their classrooms and schools, and/or connect with educational justice campaigns in the city, to create systemic change that pushes us closer to NYCoRE’s ultimate goal: to have liberatory educational practices, classrooms, and public schools as a model for the society we’d like to create. By studying in community, educators deepen their understanding of educational injustices and systems of oppression, including their own unconscious biases. NYCoRE brings together educators from various contexts in New York City, which also helps deepen awareness of the way educational injustices unfold across the city and how they take shape in relationship to the local nuances of individual school contexts. Our hope is that, as a result of NYCoRE’s critical professional development, educators become more equipped to alter curriculum, adjust classroom dynamics, and influence school policies and practices that will further educational equity and create educational spaces where all students can thrive (Love, 2019). Testimonios we have gathered from NYCoRE members as well as previous research on NYCoRE ItAGs (Kohli et. al, 2015; Picower, 2015) have shown this to be the case. NYCoRE’s critical professional development not only creates space to share resources and ideas around various topics related to educational equity, but also engages educators in freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2002; Love, 2019; Spaulding et. al., 2021). Dreaming about educational spaces where everyone can thrive is in itself a form of resistance and ensures that our fight is not stifled by our current systems and what is but also considers what could be.

Connecting Educators to Action

The Literature

Most research on educator activism in recent decades has focused on stories of and lessons from individual educator activists (Catone, 2017; Picower, 2012) or activism within teacher unions (Asselin, 2019; Charney et al., 2021; Stark, 2019). This literature has helped to define teacher activists as “educators who work for social justice both inside and outside of their classrooms” (Picower, 2012, p. 562), thus distinguishing activists from social justice classroom educators who might enact a justice-centered pedagogy inside the classroom but do not challenge larger power structures. Picower (2012) identified three commitments that represent how teachers engage in activism. The first is having “a vision of a socially just world and work[ing] to reconcile this vision with the realities of inequality that they s[ee] in the world around them” (564). The second is moving toward liberation inside of the classroom through their classroom practices and curriculum. The final commitment is standing up to oppression and pushing for systemic change using “two main approaches to make education equitable in the face of oppressive forces: (1) working collectively in groups and (2) getting teachers’ voices into the policy arena” (569). Valdez et al. (2018) define educator activism as a “struggle for” (p. 246) in order to contextualize the activism within a broader history and to emphasize “educator activism as the struggle for the inalienable right of all people to human be—to be liberated from any project of violence” (p. 247). Essentially, educator activists cannot be isolated in their classrooms; they must work with other educators, as well as students and parents, to create systemic change.

Our Present

In 2021-2022, we celebrated NYCoRE’s twenty-year anniversary. As part of that celebration, we hosted monthly learning sessions centered around our points of unity, in which we invited people doing organizing work related to those points of unity to speak on panels about the organizing that is both happening and needed in New York City schools. Videos of these sessions can be found on [our Facebook page](#). The education justice landscape has changed in the last twenty years in New York City and there are many groups doing amazing organizing work to create change: the Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE) within the United Federation of Teachers, Teachers Unite (and the broader Dignity in Schools Campaign), the Alliance for Quality Education, the Coalition for Educational Justice, Teens Take Charge, Integrate NYC, the Coalition to End Mayoral Control, the Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools, the New York State Youth Leadership Council, and so many others. Our role and place in the New York City education landscape compared to twenty years ago is both the same, in terms of pulling in educators and connecting them to action, and also different. For example, MORE now exists as a space for unionized teachers who are trying to shift power in the UFT. Teachers Unite is a member of the Dignity in Schools Campaign, working to challenge “the systemic problem of pushout in our nation’s schools” and “dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline” through changes in policy, including “alternatives to a culture of zero-tolerance,

punishment, criminalization and the dismantling of public schools” (Dignity in Schools, n.d.). The Alliance for Quality Education is advocating for equity in school funding, universal childcare, and improving school climate by dismantling the school to prison pipeline and investing in culturally sustaining education (Alliance for Quality Education, 2018). The Coalition to End Mayoral Control is fighting to end mayoral control in New York City and establish “a fully democratic, Human Rights based governance system” (The NYC Coalition to Finally End Mayoral Control 2022, 2022). Instead of always starting our own campaigns, we are looking to support campaigns like those described above. Over the years, many educators have told us that NYCoRE was their first connection to groups like those described above. In addition to continuing to foster these connections, we are also thinking more about what it means to work in solidarity and build coalitions with partners in the fight for educational justice, particularly given our limited capacity.

Beyond supporting and working in solidarity with other organizations fighting for educational justice, we also aim to be responsive to the needs of educators, students, and families and uplift those needs. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we wrote a position statement listing education and community demands as well as long-term goals that uplifted some of the campaigns we mentioned earlier as well as others (New York Collective of Radical Educators, 2020). Currently, New York state is re-evaluating its high school graduation requirements. New York is one of a few states that still requires multiple subject tests in order to graduate from high school (FairTest, 2022). In NYCoRE, we have been fighting against the punitive use of standardized tests in schools since early in our history and are continuing this fight now with a [petition](#) that calls for an end to the New York Regents exams and a move toward “holistic assessments like portfolio-based assessments that are created by students, teachers, and parents” (New York Collective of Radical Educators, 2023).

Theorizing Our Future

NYCoRE engages educators in action on the level of classrooms, schools, and systems (particularly the New York City Department of Education) in various ways. Sometimes we wonder whether NYCoRE should be engaging in our own campaign, which is a conversation that many iterations of NYCoRE core have had, but then we look at the organizing already taking place around the city and realize that our members just need places to plug in, depending on what they are most passionate about. We are reminded of the hydra metaphor, “that the attack on public education works like a many-headed monster known as the hydra” (Picower & Mayorga, 2015, p.3). We know that when one head is being addressed, other heads are continuing the hydra’s efforts, and so we continue to educate on the hydra body, neoliberalism and racism, so that educators may then come to understand how all of the heads work together as an interconnected web. In fact, our first point of unity illustrates this belief. The most recent iteration of our first point of unity is as follows:

We believe in education that centers collective liberation and self-actualization for everyone. Currently, racism,

especially anti-Black racism, neoliberalism, and racial capitalism are driving forces in educational systems, policies, and practices. These forces perpetuate the systematic and historical oppression of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and other marginalized folk; they work in concert with all forms of oppression to perpetuate a school system that is antithetical to collective liberation. As educators, we have a responsibility to address systems of oppression and their manifestations as they impact our students, our profession, and public education as a whole.

It is our belief that by expanding collaborative struggles while maintaining a clear and compelling political analysis, the hydra will eventually be slayed. Our points of unity aim to illustrate what we believe to be our collective struggles when it comes to fighting for an education that centers collective liberation and self-actualization for everyone.

We also recognize that successful coalitions require relationships and commitment; we are currently thinking about which organizations we want to be in direct partnership with and what our capacity is to build strong coalitional relationships. We have asked and continue to ask ourselves: "How might NYCoRE and others who are part of the educational justice movement develop a shared political analysis to defeat the Hydra of racialized neoliberal education reform?" (Picower & Mayorga, 2015, p.13) We believe that educators should be organizing with students and their caregivers and that this work can happen on the school level. Beyond just providing a community within NYCoRE, we're also thinking about how NYCoRE can better support educators in returning to their school buildings and working with colleagues to create change on a school-wide level. We understand that the work of addressing the many inequities in our public education system requires community and that many groups are needed to address the various issues. NYCoRE can support by connecting people to those fights and providing the political education required to understand the ways in which all these inequities are connected.

Conclusion

Broadly, the role of NYCoRE has been and continues to be supporting radical teachers inside and outside of the classroom. Inside the classroom, NYCoRE has supported educators through critical professional development that pushes educators to examine and develop their curriculum through a social justice lens. Outside of the classroom, NYCoRE has contributed to educational justice movements in New York City through political education and by building bridges between educator activists/organizers and other organizations working for educational justice.

Beyond New York City, NYCoRE is certainly not the only collective of its kind. In fact, NYCoRE initially took inspiration from similar groups in San Francisco (Teachers 4 Social Justice – T4SJ) and Chicago (Teachers for Social Justice – TSJ). NYCoRE is part of a national network called Teacher Activists Groups, in addition to being connected to national organizations like the Education for Liberation Network (Teacher Activist Groups, n.d.). NYCoRE members have also

supported the founding of similar groups in Boston and Philadelphia (K. Catone, personal communication, November 11, 2020). As Bree shared,

NYCoRE was and is a model of what teacher activism can look like, that was grassroots and created by educators. At the time, we were, as far as I know, one of three groups nationally that was doing this work. It was us, T4SJ in San Francisco, and TSJ in Chicago. I think in a lot of ways it created a model for other teachers in other cities to think about what it could look like for teachers who care about issues of social justice to come together collectively. (B. Picower, personal communication, November 25, 2020).

In addition to being spaces for educator activists to share ideas and build movements, these teacher activist groups demonstrate the power and possibility of educator activism and organizing to create change in school systems. While this power has yet to be fully realized, recent shifts toward social justice unionism within the Red for Ed movement² have shown what can be accomplished when educators work with communities to fight for educational justice. Our hope is that this article can contribute to a broader conversation about the role of teacher activist groups in progressive movements for educational justice -- creating political homes, providing critical professional development, and connecting educators to action.

Notes

1. We recognize conversations about the distinction between activism and organizing here. We have chosen to use activism in order to build on previous documentation of NYCoRE's work that has used the term activism, particularly when focusing on individual educators within NYCoRE. However, we believe that some of what NYCoRE does, particularly in terms of political education and connecting educators to larger movements for change, is also organizing work.
2. The Red for Ed movement is typically used to refer to the wave of teacher strikes that took place in 2018 and 2019. Some, although not all, of those strikes became known for their demands that included not only increases in teacher pay and benefits but also incorporated issues affecting marginalized students and families. For more information, see *Teacher Unions and Social Justice: Organizing for the Schools and Communities Our Students Deserve*, published by Rethinking Schools.

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