

# Expanding Critical Communities of Practice: CESJ as Exemplar

by  
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As readers have likely already noticed, this issue of *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* has been edited by members of a Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA): Critical Educators for Social Justice (CESJ). The purpose of this article is to detail the history, purpose and accomplishments of CESJ to date—not to proclaim its merits, but as evidence that critical educators need to and can attend to building communities for themselves as seriously as they advocate for inclusive communities for marginalized groups.

Why should critical educators prioritize creating and maintaining communities that support their work? First, we need communities because we are human and need the support of others who value our work, pick us up when we are down, allow us to lean on them, remind us that we are all in the process of becoming, honestly give advice, and challenge us to listen and grow even while we struggle to overcome limits in oppressive situations. Communities remind us of the importance of hope and love in all that we do (Freire, 1970; 1998; Nieto, 1999). Our humanness allows us to intervene in the world to change it (Freire, 1998), but it also can cause us to be discouraged and susceptible to the trap of pessimism. In our pursuit of change, we encounter, on a daily basis, educational and social

International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, Vol 3 (2) (2010) pp 151-162

justice as well as resistance to our efforts. Consequently, both professional and personal support networks are tools essential to our survival, and therefore are essential to our work.

Second, we need communities because changing the status quo is hard. Systemic change in educational and other institutions will require the constant and persistent struggles of those who maintain hope for a better future. Fullan (1993) explains,

... we have an educational system which is fundamentally conservative. The way the teachers are trained, the way that schools are organized, the way that the educational hierarchy operates, and the way that the education is treated by political decision-makers results in a system that is more likely to retain the *status quo* than to change. When change is attempted under such circumstances it results in defensiveness, superficiality or at best short-lived pockets of success. (p. 3)

Fullan's observation implies that that "pockets of success" will not sufficiently achieve the kinds of change critical educators are advocating for.

Long-lasting, far-reaching change will require an organized critical mass. Dialogue with others committed to change and awareness of the work of others feeds critical consciousness and can help to keep us going, reminding us daily why we need to do what we do (Nieto, 2003). However, we also need hope, and we need to be mindful of the steps to get from where we are to where we want to go. Forming coalitions does not take us away from our work; rather, it is part of what we need to do in order to progress. Social change is built off the work of individuals *and* organizing to bring attention to the work. Without increased public recognition, the struggle will be lonelier, longer, and more arduous.

## Critical Educators and the Academic Workplace

Because critical educators are, by definition, dedicated to redistributing power more equitably (Figure 1), antagonism from established institutions is to be expected. In direct opposition to social contexts where privilege and power are concentrated in rigid hierarchies, the critical orientation is profoundly democratic, insisting that those formerly silenced must be heard and that those with power must be helped to hear and respond justly rather than uncritically supporting the status quo.

It is somewhat ironic—though nearly inevitable, given the democratic nature of their work—that critical educators often find educational institutions uncomfortable homes. This is particularly so in vaunted democracies with public educational systems, like the United States, where education is frequently praised for its democratizing potential (even if in reality it often falls short of that potential). The culture of most educational institutions, however, has long been anti-democratic and hierarchical. Administrators have generally exercised power over (rather than

with) faculty, while faculty have generally exercised power over (rather than with) students (Freire, 2006).

Teachers have a significant role to play in developing citizens committed to social justice. They can best fulfill this role by guiding students to examine injustice, seek out multiple perspectives on social problems, and develop concrete strategies for improving their communities and nation. This work is best supported by the development of a socially just and empowering classroom community. Thus, critical educators need to teach not only about but also for social justice, in their personal relationships with students as well as in society as a whole.

Adapted from Rahima Wade's "Citizenship for Social Justice," published in the Winter 2004 Issue of the *Kappa Delta Phi Record*.

Critical educators must recognize how schools function within an untenable contradiction. On one hand, schools are expected to respond to the needs of hierarchies associated with the capitalist labor force and the marketplace. And, on the other hand, schools are suppose to create equality of access to rights and opportunities for the nation's citizens' as promised within an ostensibly democratic republic. Critical educators who are concerned with social justice, then, work toward establishing a culture that cultivates human connection, intimacy, trust and honesty, within the complex sociopolitical context in which educational institutions are located.

Adapted from Antonia Darder's speech "A Reflection on Educators for Social Justice," at the 2004 Annual Business Meeting of the AERA CESJ SIG in San Diego, CA

*Figure 1: CESJ Statements on the Role of Critical Educators*

In higher education, a hierarchical structure is both rigid and explicit, with faculty rank reifying a ladder of increasing power and success. The very terminology of *non-tenured*, *instructor*, *tenure-line*, *tenured*, *lecturer*, *assistant*, *associate*, and *full professor* makes clear the institutional pecking order and links professional success of academicians to the maintenance of the hierarchical structure. For example, assistant professors are routinely counseled that in order to survive professionally they must publish in established, refereed, top-tiered journals, where the likelihood of their work being reviewed by critical educators is low.

In fact, it is difficult to imagine a greater mismatch between professional commitments and institutional culture than the one experienced by critical educators who labor within the academy. To be sure, there are entire departments and pro-

grams dedicated to working toward social justice. They are, however, rare pockets of professional community. More commonly, critical educators who wish to be tenured and/or promoted are urged to publish in mainstream journals, although their work lies outside mainstream thinking. Critical work is, in fact, a significant challenge to the status quo, and it may be rejected by mainstream journals as “not objective” and/or “not scientific” because its philosophical and political commitments are made explicit. At the same time, institutions rarely value critical educators’ important work in the field with a variety of partners—immigrant parents and community activists, for example—because such partnerships rarely attract grant money or gain national attention, thus contributing little to the institution’s prestige. Indeed, critical educators are expected to support the goals and policies of their institutions at a time when higher education is being widely criticized for having adopted a corporate mentality privileging increased revenue over student welfare (Bousquet, 2008; Giroux & Giroux, 2006; Washburn, 2005), even though a corporate mentality contradicts the core work of critical educators.

In the environment of higher education, individual practitioners and graduate students can easily feel both isolated and at risk, since success in the academy depends upon the support of others who are often unsupportive of, or may even object to, critical challenges to the status quo. Feeling such pressures as marginalized members of their institutions and also perceiving a need to broaden an activist education community, a core of a very few critical educators founded the Special Interest Group (SIG) Critical Educators for Social Justice (CESJ) within one of the largest, most influential professional education organizations, the American Educational Research Association (AERA).

From a small beginning, the group has continued to grow exponentially and to provide support and community for its members, who now number in the hundreds. Unfortunately, nearly a decade after CESJ’s inception, its members report facing the same challenges as the SIG’s founders. Our hope is that as we detail CESJ’s evolution, readers will come to understand how one group of critical educators sought community and partnership with others to advance common goals. This path is one among many possibilities, and we detail it to illustrate the potential of active engagement. Following this specific discussion of CESJ, we offer readers suggestions for seeking out social justice networks whose goals may resonate with them.

Whatever the path—creating a new community or engaging with an existing one—we maintain it is essential for critical educators to actively seek out and engage in extended relationships with like-minded others.

## CESJ, Then and Now

### *History*

Minutes of the first CESJ business meeting at the 2001 AERA Annual Meeting in New Orleans indicate that from its inception, the SIG's focus was "social activism, the need to build a social movement in education, and providing a forum to share emancipatory teaching and community projects" (see Figure 2). The founding members had all worked together in a state network, the California Consortium for Critical Educators. This state-level work led them to believe that critical educators needed a national presence in order to promote wide scale change, and they began considering how to create a space for critical voices and perspectives on a much larger stage. They concluded that a viable option was to pursue a SIG within AERA—perhaps the most traditional and visible of all educational organizations.

In 2002, a year after its inception, 40 members attended CESJ's annual business meeting at AERA. Within three short years, a 2004 newsletter announced that CESJ had become the 9<sup>th</sup> largest SIG, with 254 members. Since that time, membership has steadily increased. CESJ has remained either the largest or one of the largest SIGs since its early years. Over the eight years CESJ has existed, its membership has included some 500 individual educators. As this article is being written in early 2009, membership stands at 365, but it will rise as members register for the approaching spring meeting and renew their SIG affiliations.

The members of this, the Critical Educators for Social Justice (CESJ) Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), are committed to teach, promote, and implement the principles of critical pedagogy in order to establish an educational movement grounded in the struggle for social and economic justice, human rights and economic democracy. The members of CESJ are committed to cultural, linguistic, political, and economic self-determination within our classrooms, schools and communities.

A major goal of CESJ is to foment a serious educational process that cultivates intellectual rigor, creativity, critical engagement, and active participation in the world. We believe that education, as a form of critical understanding, plays a crucial role in transforming society; therefore, we recognize the significance of sustaining the committed participation of educators whose work is founded upon these principles.

A significant objective of CESJ is to promote communication and collaboration among critical educators and researchers working in public schools, universities and community education programs through networking and the creation of multiple avenues for consistent communication and the establishment of alliances and goals among its membership.

*Figure 2: Critical Educators for Social Justice Mission Statement*

Not surprisingly, conforming to requirements of a mainstream organization has presented a series of interesting dilemmas for CESJ leadership. For example, AERA requires all SIGs to have a Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer, whereas early members imagined such organizational roles as Elders (those having earlier

experience who could provide counsel to newcomers taking on responsibility for CESJ functions) and Firestarters (those who would have responsibility for launching new projects). Moreover, leaders had to define criteria to assess presentation proposals for CESJ-sponsored sessions at AERA's Annual Meeting. Since critical educators generally are constructivists who believe in multiple realities and reject the existence of any single "objective" reality, identifying research standards that would open spaces for critical voices while simultaneously cultivating credibility within the wider, mainstream organization was a challenge. By 2004, however, the challenge had been met. It is notable that this SIG, under the AERA umbrella, includes as a criterion for proposals that the research being reported have the "potential to impact, in socially just ways, the lives of children, K-12 schools, and/or the communities in which families live."

In addition to the structural work necessary to build a network within AERA, members have wrestled with important and substantive issues at each annual CESJ business meeting.

#### *Dialogue, Praxis, and Other Issues of Community*

The 2001 meeting produced a list of concerns and questions CESJ members wanted to address with colleagues. These included

- Responding to backlash against critical research appearing in mainstream journals
- Addressing child poverty in the United States and elsewhere
- Methodology and audience for research in social justice domains
- Organizing classroom teachers in local and state networks to challenge an increasingly conservative focus of education
- Forming liaisons with policy makers to familiarize them with critical research
- Connecting critical educators from kindergarten through university and forming coalitions with parents around issues of educational justice

As this early list indicates, the goals of critical educators are large—potentially world-changing—and practical progress has been seen from the beginning to depend upon the formation of coalitions. Such coalitions must span the breadth of stakeholders, including parents and kindergarten teachers as well as researchers

and politicians; in doing so, we create space for voices rarely heard in public arenas.

Minutes of the 2003 meeting reflect that as the group matured, members began to look still more broadly at issues of justice, turning their attention to such areas as: the globalized social order and the role of global financial institutions; NCATE's standard on diversity; multicultural education; and environmental justice. Each year since its inception, CESJ has brought together researchers and activists for such conversation, clarification, sharing of research and other initiatives—and community. Each year, members find new ways of living out the formal mission of the SIG.

More recently, at the 2007 CESJ business meeting, members expressed the need for (1) an active community of educators serving as mentors and colleagues involved in social justice work, (2) action projects for the SIG members, and (3) opportunities for those involved in social justice projects to publish their work in ways that count in the academy. One action project proposed at that time was an edited book, an idea that morphed over time into this special edition of *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, a vehicle those involved with the project hope will reach a wider readership more quickly.

CESJ has struggled with the same challenges as many other organizations, including individual members committed in many other ways, making time to contribute to organizational efforts scarce. However, CESJ has had significant accomplishments. Some of the SIG's work, like this edited collection of articles, is public and highly visible. Equally important and far less visible, however, are the relationships formed within the CESJ network that have yielded significant results outside of it.

## CESJ Members Working On Stage and Behind the Scenes

### *Public Efforts*

Readers attending to this article have in hand a wide variety of other articles authored by critical educators detailing their work and research in an international publication. The work in hand, then, is a prime example of one community's commitment to support and promote critical educational research in prominent venues.

CESJ has had significant success in creating a space within AERA for critical voices: the 2009 AERA program included 11 sessions sponsored by CESJ, all

involving multiple presenters and much original research; the 2008 program included 13 such sessions. Obviously there is more work to be done to achieve a critical mass since there are hundreds of sessions at each AERA annual meeting. However, the AERA conference programs increasingly have sessions with phrases such as “social justice” included, and since the formation of CESJ, the Paulo Freire SIG was formed. The stated purpose of the Paulo Freire SIG is:

to honor Freire’s legacy by promoting scholarship that applies, extends, critiques, and reinvents Freirean pedagogy. Also, to promote historical scholarship that looks at the life of Paulo Freire and the context of his ideas and practices. Finally, to act as a catalyst for the creation of new forms of critical pedagogies that build upon the foundation that Freire established (§ 1).

The mission of this SIG, although differently focused, shares core values with CESJ and indicates progress toward a critical mass of like-minded cultural workers.

In addition, an important outcome of CESJ’s commitment to collaboration and to large scale change has been its involvement in The Social Justice, Peace, and Environmental Education Standards Project.<sup>9</sup> In response to the conservative standards movement, which has resulted in high stakes testing and mind-numbing test preparation in classrooms, some sixteen AERA SIGs and other prominent organizations have been working to “help forge a set of standards, guidelines, or queries representing collective visions for social justice, peace, and ecological sustainability.” [No author or date for previous quote?] By reclaiming the word “standards” to reflect a concern for people (in contrast to conservative concern for competition in the “global marketplace”), the project’s goal is “to increase visibility, credibility, and accountability for SJPEE in the national educational agenda.”

As a preliminary step, various constituent groups have drafted documents expanding their vision for social justice standards based on key “theoretical perspectives, foundational documents and models,” incusing such documents as the Alaska Native Knowledge Network’s *Standards for Culturally Relevant Schools* (1998) and materials from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990). CESJ Elder Marta P. Baltodano actively participated in this project, eventually authoring the SIG’s contribution, “Transformative Principles for Social Justice” (n.d.), which stresses the need to understand “the geo-political forces that shape the current economic order.” (“Transformative Principles for Social Justice”). As is true for much work begun within the confines of CESJ, however, this work has grown into a project outside the SIG itself. In this case, groundwork begun in many of the SIGs has evolved into a complete text, *Social Justice, Peace, and Environmental Standards: Transformative Standards* (Andrzejewski, Baltondano & Symcox, 2009). As promotional material notes, this work moves beyond “just

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9 See <http://www.aeracesjsig.org/initiatives/SJPEE%20article%20FINAL%20%5B1%5D.pdf>



talking about coalition building” to a demonstration of “how we might communicate from different vantage points and disciplinary boundaries to create a broader picture of social and eco-justice.”<sup>10</sup>

In addition to seeding such far reaching collaborations and projects, conversations among CESJ colleagues at annual meetings have made clear the importance of less public efforts, perhaps most notably the need to formalize ways for experienced critical educators to support and mentor junior colleagues, including doctoral students. In 2008, CESJ sponsored a Graduate Student Fireside Chat titled “The Struggle and Hope for Critical Researchers and Scholars,” in which senior faculty discussed their own challenges and accomplishments to help students and new professors strategize for successful careers as advocates for the less powerful. So responsive was that audience that in 2009, in conjunction with the Annual Meeting of AERA in San Diego, the First (annual) Critical Educators for Social Justice SIG Graduate Student Forum was held. Scholarships for this event were awarded, with recipients ranging from first year doctoral students to assistant professors, representing home institutions stretching from Buffalo, NY to Manoa, HI, and with research interests ranging from the impact of native languages on mathematics learning to the challenges and opportunities for critical educators in classrooms for children of privilege.

CESJ members and other critical educators have demonstrated solidarity not only with educators from a wide variety of interest areas within AERA but also with stakeholders from other realms. For example, at the 2003 Annual Meeting of AERA, one sponsored session titled “On the Edge of Each Other’s Battles” met in the San Diego barrio and featured a panel of local activists. At the same meeting, when news of a march supporting immigrants reached CESJ members, a large contingent of them marched in solidarity with the immigrants. For the 2009 meeting, CESJ members were kept apprised of labor issues related to a conference hotel, as many members are active in supporting unions. When individuals with a particular interest share timely information with other SIG members in this way, it helps critical educators to continue to whittle away at the divide (whether imaginary or real) between academicians and other cultural workers.

On still another front, and although it has not yet reached fruition, another CESJ goal is to compile a listing of senior faculty willing to serve as external reviewers for junior faculty seeking tenure. As any critical educator who has pursued tenure knows, it can be challenging to identify reviewers who will not only understand research done from a critical perspective but also have time and inclination to provide such service. This is a key area where a critical mass can have significant impact on the movement for social justice: if our work is to become established within our institutional homes, helping to validate the work of junior

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10 In the spirit of walking the talk, the editors are donating all monies from this book to non-profit groups working for social justice.

faculty is essential. In the interim, CESJ panels and business meetings provide ample opportunity for young scholars who need to make such connections to introduce themselves to established scholars in critical fields.

### *Private Efforts*

As is already evident, educators who participate in networks like CESJ cannot help but experience a great deal of professional development. While all critical educators share core concerns, individual contexts give rise to a wide variety of opportunities and efforts. For example, waiting for a CESJ panel to begin, an audience member working with ethnocentric Native American schools in Arizona might strike up a conversation with a California educator campaigning against Proposition 227, banning bilingual education, or with a peace activist from Maryland railing about state trooper spying. Such informal conversations, in addition to formal presentations, help critical educators remember the depth and breadth of the challenges to be met—and to be encouraged by the good work being done by others on a multitude of other fronts.

Because critical educators share a commitment to others, it is not unusual for these casual conversations to grow into larger mentoring and/or collegial relationships. Experienced members of CESJ have introduced newer members and scholars to publishers—and a book has been published. Two members discovering a mutual interest during a discussion session decided to extend their conversation over a morning coffee—and an article resulted. In addition, meeting others who understand research interests and challenges often means finding readers for work in progress. Many writers need trusted readers who can understand what is being attempted and can provide insight into what is and isn't working in a draft as well as suggest additional resources or information to help flesh out an idea. If, as a community, critical educators find such readers for their work, our work as a whole is likely to be strengthened and to ultimately reach a wider audience.

Strengthening the corps of critical work is essential—but the support for individual practitioners enabling that goal is equally important on a human level. As already noted, critical educators are often in an isolating and discouraging institutional situation, with our work often subject to review by hostile readers. The scathing criticism that sometimes results in such situations can be debilitating, and it is urgent that the practitioner working in isolation be connected to like-minded others who can help restore perspective and confidence. When editors of a mainstream journal declined to send one of the author's manuscripts out for review, for example, among their complaints was that "the rhetoric and positions taken were not balanced." Since all critical educators have explicit political commitments, such criticisms can make a writer despair of finding outlets for critical work. Good colleagues who understand critical work can offer much needed perspective and make the task of trying again far easier. In this case, one

trusted reader asked, “Who did they send it to? E. D. Hirsch?” Another advised, “Be angry at them and send it to another journal.”

This is not to say that reviewer criticism should automatically be dismissed as irrelevant or that every manuscript submitted is ready for publication. It is to say, however, that critical manuscripts are often read by reviewers steeped in research traditions and ideologically biased against critical work. Their criticisms may be scathing and yet not much help in identifying genuine areas of weakness in a manuscript. Good colleagues willing to read drafts and offer criticism, then, are crucial for critical researchers to strengthen our work and to maintain perspective and confidence in the face of the rejections and criticism we may receive. CESJ and other similar networks provide opportunities for individuals to form and maintain crucially supportive personal and professional relationships.

## Opportunities for Social Action and Personal Networking

Opportunities for working for educational and social justice are unlimited; the articles in this issue of the *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* of critical educators at work is only the tip of the iceberg of what is actually happening. Only through pragmatic steps to increase the increments of change will we collectively achieve a critical mass that is connected and informed. Concern for developing a larger community of critical educators is an essential component of our work. Nieto (1999) reminds us that critical pedagogy is

an approach through which students and teachers engage in learning as a mutual encounter with the world. Critical pedagogy also implies *praxis*, that is, developing the important social action predispositions and attitudes that are the backbone of democratic society, and learning to use them to help alter patterns of domination and oppression. (pp. 103–104)

In order to build and sustain a democratic society, we need simultaneously to work in our local communities and connect to others who are engaged in similar work. A slight reordering of a familiar bumper sticker captures this principle in a few words: “Act locally; think globally.”

We conclude with questions for all critical educators to keep in mind while working in the academy and beyond.

1. Am I connected to communities that can sustain me and my work? If so, am I an active participant, giving back to those communities and furthering the social justice movement on both the local and global scale? If not, what might be my first step to finding such communities?
2. Besides doing the work important to me, have I taken steps to make it public and to explicitly connect it to the work of other critical educators/cultural workers?

All communal work begins with individuals taking first steps like these.

To help develop, extend and connect critical organizations, the CESJ website includes a list of related organizations readers may want to consider adding to their electronic bookmarks (See <http://www.aeracesjsig.org/resources.html>). The key is to make room in our already busy schedules to attend to building and maintaining personal and professional communities of critical practice. Actively addressing our own human needs for support and connection is neither self-indulgent nor inefficient, as some would argue: “I am more worried about others than myself” or “I don’t have time to waste sitting around at meetings.” Instead, we nourish ourselves *and* our work when we prioritize nurturing such connections.

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