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Tinkering No More: A Call for Social Movements in This Time of Crisis

Frances Free Ramos

Recent disasters—like the highly destructive hurricanes of 2017 and a series of earthquakes that began in 2019—have rattled Puerto Rico. In the absence of meaningful action from state institutions, the people of my homeland have come together to support each other. Among other things, the community’s response to these disasters has illuminated the central role that schools play in people’s lives and the important role that teachers and school communities play in organizing efforts to address people’s immediate needs and demand state action. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools and businesses to close, I saw similar dynamics in my Oakland community. As a parent of three children and an activist scholar, I organized with my children’s school communities to support vulnerable families by sharing resources and advocating for our community. Reflecting on these efforts in Oakland, I discuss factors that facilitated families and teachers’ ability to support each other. I draw connections to similar efforts in Puerto Rico after the recent hurricanes and earthquakes to argue that both sets of crises illuminate how public schools are critical state institutions that provide lifelines to many vulnerable families, yet they cannot make up for the lack of social policies that can protect all residents in times of crisis. These crises underscore the need for social movements to act toward the radical transformation of the racial-capitalist systems that cause extreme disparities and exacerbate the damage caused by natural disasters.

The current pandemic has exposed how our racially stratified and highly unequal labor market determines how people fare in times of crisis. Some children in our communities have their own computers and high-speed internet for online learning, whereas others have only a cell phone, and others have no technology to access schoolwork. Some have their own rooms, backyard areas, and safe neighborhoods for sheltering in place, yet other children spend days in

small apartments and yearn for schools to reopen so they can go outside and play. Some parents continue to work and receive salaries, but many others have lost jobs and all sources of income. Some parents juggle working from home while helping children with schoolwork, and others have to leave children at home because they have to work and struggle to keep a roof over their heads. Some received stimulus checks and unemployment benefits, whereas others received nothing, or, if fortunate, small donations or grants from community groups or nonprofit organizations. The deep disparities in living conditions and opportunities to learn, though not new (Anyon, 2014), are laid bare for all of us to witness.

In Oakland, as in Puerto Rico, teachers and parents played crucial roles in connecting families, raising funds, and advocating for school and city leaders to provide necessary relief and protection. When, at the start of shelter in place, city, state, and federal institutions failed to provide safety nets and supports needed to keep people safe and housed, educators and concerned residents rallied together to fill the void. In our school communities, parents worked with school leaders and teachers to raise funds for families who lost income, facilitated access to relief funds, distributed computers and hotspots for those with no internet access, and delivered free meals and supplies. We helped families apply for state aid available for students who qualified for free or reduced lunch (\$300 per child for the summer months) and trained parents to access online learning with their students.

Two factors were critical to our school community's ability to support vulnerable families: (a) our diversity across class, racial, ethnic, and language groups; and (b) the leadership of Black, Latina, and Asian women who helped the school leverage that diversity in productive ways. Our school enrolls many students living in poverty, most of whom are either Latinx, Black, or Asian, and a smaller percentage of middle-income families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds—including a small number of white families. Though we have encountered challenges in responding to the abrupt move to online learning, we continue to take care of each other as best we can. More economically stable families and teachers, who have continued to receive salaries during the pandemic, were eager to donate to others who had lost jobs in our school community; in a matter of days, we raised several thousand dollars. Across Oakland, teachers donated their stimulus checks to a fund for families that did not qualify for federal relief and called upon others to do the same. These ongoing efforts put cash in the hands of families in dire need of money for food, bills, and rent.

As a dual immersion Spanish and English language school, many of our staff, teachers, and families are bilingual. We also have many monolingual Spanish-speaking families and families from Central America who speak indigenous languages. The presence of many bilingual persons in our school community

facilitates our ability to support parents and caregivers who speak little or no English. We learn what their needs are and provide information, access to technology, and training for parents to support students' use of online learning tools. Through these outreach efforts, our school leadership was able to determine the types of advocacy and organizing needed to address families' long-term needs. At the start of the pandemic, many in our community were surprised to learn the number of families who lacked home internet access. This realization fueled community support for the local teachers' union campaign calling for the district to provide free internet to all students.

How our school community leverages the diversity of our student body lends support to research that shows how integrated schools can create more equitable conditions and outcomes for poor students of color (Hannah-Jones, 2016; Johnson, 2019). As political and school leaders put little effort into addressing the extremely high levels of racial and economic segregation in most urban districts (Scott, 2005), research has shown that segregation and concentration of poverty exacerbate educational inequities (Orfield et al., 2016). Thinking of how our school community initially mobilized the financial, social, and political capital of some to quickly address the needs of more vulnerable families left me wondering about the fate of similarly vulnerable families in other high-poverty schools. In the face of bureaucratic hurdles within the school district, the ability to mobilize and redistribute our internal resources helped many families in our community access online learning and sorely needed material support when the shift to online learning first happened. When our local and state institutions failed to provide vulnerable children and families with basic needs, being part of a school community with a degree of socioeconomic diversity facilitated the redistribution of some resources.

An equally, if not more, important asset in our school community that impacted our ability to care for each other during the pandemic was the leadership of teachers and parents of color. Our school principal and school site council president are Black women, and our office team, family coordinator, and many teachers and parent leaders are Latina/x women. This was important for navigating the challenges that Posey-Maddox (2014) and other scholars have found in racially and economically mixed schools. In a study of a mixed urban school, Posey-Maddox found that racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity in public schools can present a unique set of challenges as parents with more social capital crowd out the voices of racially and economically marginalized parents.

These dynamics are on display in our school community. For example, white parents and middle-class parents with privilege sometimes treat teachers and school leaders of color with a lack of respect. There are also instances when some parents and teachers feel that more privileged parents expect their needs to be prioritized and take up disproportionate space in parent and teacher groups.

However, parent organizers and educators of color help mitigate against some of these dynamics. Women of color help address issues when the efforts of privileged parents in our school community lack sensitivity or awareness of racist and classist dynamics. They also push our parent community to go beyond fundraising to advocate for local and state policies, like a moratorium on rent and evictions, that could ease the hardships of the pandemic on struggling families. In dealing with the pandemic and the sudden disruptions to school and work that we all face, leaders in our school community must have sensibilities that nurture solidarity and organizing over narrow and paternalistic acts of charity.

These collective efforts to address families' urgent needs demonstrate the importance of public institutions, like schools, for offering needed provisions. In the best cases, public schools may provide a link between vulnerable students and families and available resources, including social-emotional support from caring teachers and fellow parents. At our school, we use our established parent and teacher groups, the School Site Council and the Parent Teacher Union, to support each other and to provide an avenue for sharing ideas around advocating and organizing for local and state action to provide access to technology, financial relief, and protection from eviction. However, we have no way of knowing how many families, or people without children, fail to receive the types of supports that some schools provide. We can only imagine how much needless suffering and loss of learning occurred in the absence of more robust and comprehensive social policies and adequate funding for public institutions.

Despite our attempts to support the most vulnerable families, our school community could not address the full range of needs because our current social and economic policies create vast inequities that even the best school communities, teachers, and school leaders cannot fully address. In the face of structural racism and racialized capitalism, teacher and community advocacy and mutual aid cannot keep people from dying or suffering needlessly, families from becoming homeless, or children from losing opportunities to learn. Our social policies leave too many without access to basic needs, like food, water, shelter, and healthcare, and create vast inequities in income that determine the quality of safety nets, safe spaces, and available technology. For people of color—especially Black and Indigenous people—there is also the ever-present danger and trauma of state-sanctioned violence that compound the material conditions leading to premature death (Gilmore, 2002).

This moment of a global pandemic, the explosion of racial state-sanctioned violence, and a sharp turn toward political conservatism reinforce what many education scholars and educators have insisted for decades: Attaining equity and justice in education requires social movements to restructure our political and economic systems and dismantle structural racism (Anyon, 2014; Tarlau, 2016). The current pandemic illuminates the dire need for a universal basic income and

other safety nets that would allow more parents to stay home with their children rather than risking their family's health for economic security. It would disincentivize society from treating schools and teachers as the only childcare system for working parents. It would keep families and all people housed and fed, even when the economy practically comes to a halt. Universal healthcare would keep more people from getting sick and help others recover more quickly, potentially saving countless lives. Although we expect COVID-19 to pass eventually, we know to expect more pandemics and global disasters in the future, especially given the failure of government leaders to take bold action on climate change in the face of capitalism's disregard for life and the health of our planet. Thus, we must take seriously the idea that crisis may be our new normal and take bold and decisive action to address this reality (Collins, 2020; Vestergaard Frandsen, 2020).

Though public institutions and social policies can do much to decrease suffering and premature death, only social movements that take aim at the structures and processes of racial capitalism can ensure the type of society in which educational justice can become a reality. In addition to fighting for racial and economic reforms, social movements must seek to dismantle structural racism and racial capitalism. Structural racism diminishes the political will to pass policies like universal basic income and healthcare because Black, Indigenous, and Brown lives are deemed disposable (Akuno, 2015; Golash-Boza, 2015). Racial capitalism renders all lives disposable, and it is the engine that drives massive global shifts in climate and the displacement of millions of people across the globe. Colonial laws put in place to facilitate accumulation through dispossession—such as the Jones Act that forces aid headed to Puerto Rico to be taxed and delayed—exacerbate the level of suffering and number of deaths in the wake of natural disasters like hurricanes, droughts, wildfires, and pandemics. Capitalism destroys first by exploiting the planet and intensifying climate change and then leaving many people exposed to the ravages of climate disasters (Klein, 2007). From hurricanes in New Orleans and Puerto Rico to wildfires in California and the global COVID-19 pandemic, many Black, Indigenous, and Brown people are displaced from their homes and ancestral lands or are left to die.

Education researchers have a role to play in changing this trajectory too, but only if we combine research with action and move from tinkering toward utopia (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) to active engagement in efforts that seek radical transformations. Scholars can also help social movements by combining studies that expose how power functions to maintain the current racial and economic order with examinations of how teachers, communities, and youth engage in the struggle to transform structures that shape their lives and limit their futures. Research on grassroots organizing and social justice movements can help these efforts expand by informing the praxis of movement leaders and connecting

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movements worldwide. Just as importantly, research highlighting the active and creative resistance of communities feeds the critical hope (Duncan Andrade, 2009) needed to combat the overwhelming sense of hopelessness and despair that can become entrenched in times of crisis.

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